FILTHY
LITTLE FIX
QUINN ORIN

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EPILOGUE

CHAD.

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Author's Note: Do Not Skip

Writing this story was a really fun experience, but I need to be upfront: **this is an intensely dark and twisted book.** It's strange, it's definitely unusual, and our protagonists, Leo and Dante, are walking red flags (but with a **happy ending**, even sweet inside their own disturbed world, so don't worry!).

I've seen this warning in a book once, and I feel it's essential to state it here: the kind of relationship portrayed in this story is a dark fantasy and **must** be kept within the pages of fiction. If you ever encounter a Dante or a Leo in real life, please turn around, run, and don't look back. Your peace of mind and your safety are paramount.

Thank you so much for picking up this book. I hope you enjoy diving into the twisted minds of these characters as much as I enjoyed bringing them to life.

And, most importantly, **DO NOT SKIP THE TRIGGER WARNINGS. Read them carefully,** and do not proceed unless you are completely comfortable with these themes.

Read safely!

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Trigger Warning

This book contains mature themes that may not be suitable for all readers. Please be advised of the following:

- **Explicit Violence, Blood & Torture**
  - Descriptions of torture, blood, physical assault, and murder.
- **Kidnapping & Captivity**
  - The central plot involves a kidnapping and the main character being held captive.
- **Explicit Sexual Content**
  - There are sex scenes with unbalanced power dynamics. The protagonist finds pleasure and excitement in situations of EXTREME pain, danger, and submission.
- **Psychological Abuse & Manipulation**
  - Mind games, threats, isolation, and explicit emotional manipulation are central pillars of the dynamic between the protagonists. They **do not** by any means represent an ideal relationship.
- **Mentions of Substance Abuse**

    - There are minor references to the abuse of psychiatric drugs. However, this is not a central theme in the plot.
- **Suicidal Ideation**
    - The protagonist expresses thoughts about suicide through internal monologues and dialogues. He also describes symptoms and feelings of deep **depression** and apathy.
- **Strong Language & Graphic Content**
    - The narrative uses frequent obscene language and detailed descriptions of violence and explicit sex. Nothing is left to the imagination.
- **Dental Trauma**
    - Descriptions of broken teeth and related pain, **also** in sexual contexts.

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CHAPTER I

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ONE

LEO

I HAVE A FERN.

The head of HR ran an experiment with my department. Said that personalizing your workspace—your six-square-meter gray cubicle—boosted productivity. My left-hand coworker taped a poster to the wall, and my right-hand coworker lined up a few depressing miniatures from some children's game to remind her of all the joy that had been wrung from her by capitalism.

My personalization is a fern.

Taking care of a fern was the best idea I've ever had. I get out of bed because a fern doesn't water itself. I talk to it. I release CO_2 by spitting out words it doesn't understand near its leaves to help it turn greener. There's a scientific basis for it. My right-hand neighbor said, *they're social like us, then. They form attachments, like us*. I think it's a dumb comparison. I told her there's a chemical reaction when we stroke them. Since then, she strokes my fern every day when she thinks I'm not looking—she believes my fern has a central nervous system.

I didn't say what chemical reactions are being triggered.

Going to work is tedious. Rows upon rows of tiny, gray, and, most special of all, my own personalized cubicle. I come in every morning, water my fern, and face a sea of gray cubicles stretching into the monotony. The rest of it—sitting in front of that relic of a computer from 2001 with its radioactive CRT monitor, being milked to fill out Excel spreadsheets—was

just a side effect of my primary function: keeping a fern alive. The IT section of my contract mentions all sorts of technical stuff, but the most technical thing I've done is solve ridiculous, homespun problems. Nicole didn't understand why the printer wouldn't turn on or connect. I said, "I wonder why, Nicole?" and she said, "Chad gave it a virus." The printer was unplugged.

The midday turnstiles are the trumpets of a reverse apocalypse. They seem to announce that I can soon return to my life—far from big corporations and managers with gelled-up combovers.

Chad surveys the office sometimes, or pretends to. He spends most of his time away from the rest of us—far from the cubicles, lounging somewhere above the chaos, because he's above the little people. He's just a little less little. He has his own office, and the door has Chad's name on it—a silver plaque that would be ripped off at the first opportunity to get rid of human resources. I support getting rid of them. Getting rid of Chad.

"Leo, my champ! We need that bug report for yesterday, okay? Counting on you!"

Sure, Chad, I'd love to spend the rest of my miserable existence hunting for syntax errors in your shitty code.

What I actually say is, "No problem, Chad."

Chad went to watch half-naked women dance on TikTok in his office, with his door closed and a sign hanging on the knob saying how busy he was—while I search for where he forgot the semicolon. Where he didn't close the damn bracket, which variable he forgot to define. Chad makes the kind of mistakes any programmer would, just as he makes mistakes like a 14-year-old playing hacker after graduating from YouTube tutorials. He doesn't automate anything. His code is as ugly as his comb-over—long, crude, and painfully repetitive, like a bad haircut that won't grow out.

He's glued to some woman dancing on TikTok, the same tired loop blaring from his open office door, while I hunt through his maze of forgotten semicolons and brackets. A trap song that loops endlessly, repeating like all the feeble functions in that code. I hear it from my cubicle. My neighbors wear headphones.

My fern is the only thing that seems to thrive.

The final beep of the turnstile at six p.m. echoes like a herald of freedom—yet it's just a brief, false escape from this cage. The air outside is polluted but smells better than Chad's overpowering spray deodorant.

On the bus, humanity squeezes together in its collective misery. Tired faces, empty stares. Just another worker stuck crawling through all this shit.

My home is like any other. Not much furniture—mostly secondhand, poorly made—and not much personality. I don't care about houses. Dull colors and small rooms.

I rip off my tie—the worst part of office work—and unbutton my shirt. I drink water and take an expired pill with a black-box warning from the drawer. I open my laptop.

The laptop is the most expensive thing you can find in the house. If you consider the symbolic and sentimental meaning of home, mine is in it—in this machine of ones and zeros.

I never open any window in full screen, and the laptop's built-in camera remains permanently covered. What I do at home is secondary to caring for the fern.

It's not for the money. I'd shit on it if I didn't need it to live.

It's for the adrenaline.

I'm good at what I do, and it isn't reviewing ridiculous code.

The current client doesn't want much. Security breaches are my specialty, and ripping secret information from encrypted systems isn't that hard, most of the time. And the boredom, Chad's cubicle, it invades my head now and then. The same security protocols with the same loopholes. When I say I do this for the adrenaline, I mean it *was* like that in the beginning. Something new.

Now, more of the same. Security protocols just need to get better. I need a real challenge.

I'm known for this, for breaking any and every kind of system. Finding the breach, dismembering it, and ripping its guts out with my bare hands. I've searched for bigger and deeper problems and gotten into some fucked-up things. Bad people. Thefts, scams. Wars between mafia families.

So why has no one ever caught me? No one's ever knocked on my door, beaten me to death. Not a single punch, not a mark.

I leave traces of myself wherever I go. On purpose. Coded messages, hidden files, altered logs. I even leave ASCII art in the code, yet no one has connected the dots to stop me.

Like an old, outdated TLS 1.0 protocol—prehistoric, really.

Security is outdated—TLS 1.0, SSL configured by a sleepy intern, patches ignored for months, passwords stored in text files on the manager's

desktop.

This time, I leave another one of my digital art pieces behind and finish the job—a job I don't even know if I should charge for. It's just that ridiculous; a stupid, dangerous hacking gig with no future. Sitting in front of a computer doesn't do it for me anymore. All I really want is a genuine opportunity that makes me feel alive beyond this digital masquerade. Just give me a *real* job—something that makes me *feel*.

Tomorrow, I'll tend to the fern again. Chad. Nicole.

The cycle.

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TWO

DANTE

THE SMOKE from my Cuban cigar hangs in the air, heavy and sweet, mingling with the smell of blood, sweat, and shit. It's a familiar aroma. A scent I associate with a Tuesday morning. With a progress report.

The son of a bitch on the floor writhes and whimpers. His dark trousers, once immaculate, are now soaked in urine and something else I'd prefer not to identify. His eyes fill with panic, just wet slits. He doesn't see the door, doesn't see the window, doesn't see a way out. He only sees me. Or what he *thinks* he sees. A devil, maybe. But I'm just a man. A very, very pissed-off man.

"Say it again, Anton," I say. I stay calm; my men handle the noise. Luca knows precisely where and how to hit to maximize pain without breaking him early. It's a talent. A talent I compensate well. "You don't know anything?"

Anton shakes his head, his face a bizarre grimace of pain and denial. He tries to speak, but Luca just knocked out a tooth. Anton drools blood and spit.

"I swear... I swear to God, Mr. Dante... I don't know shit about this Nyx. I'm just a low-level programmer. They paid me to install some things, some code... but I don't know who this guy is! I really don't know who's responsible for the leak! For the love of God!"

My patience is a taut string. It's about to snap. I bring the cigar to my lips, drawing in a cloud of bitter smoke, to remind myself this is *just a job*.

The flames in the fireplace crackle in the corner of the room, a cozy sound for a private hell. My estate, a private haven where discretion reigns, holds me. A place where discretion is law and screams don't travel beyond the walls.

"Luca," I call out, without taking my eyes off the worm on the floor.

Luca stops. The iron bar ceases its rise and fall. He's breathing heavily, sweat dripping down his forehead. He's a big man. An ox. And loyal. Loyalty is everything in this business.

"Tell him what happens to liars who cross me—especially when the cost is high. When it compromises the safety of my family."

Luca approaches Anton, who shrinks away. The man is a data broker, selling sensitive client information to whoever paid the most, crossing lines that should never be crossed. I know. I've hired him myself a few times.

When you sell information on the Volkov family, you sign your own death warrant.

"You've been warned, Anton," Luca growls. "We don't like lies. And we'll squeeze you dry until we're sure there's nothing left."

Anton chokes on bloody saliva. Luca, responding swiftly, stops Anton with a hard kick to the shoulder, silencing any further movement. A dry snap. Anton screams, a high-pitched, almost feminine sound. I don't even blink.

"I don't know anything!" he pleads again in a hoarse whisper. "They just... they just asked me to install things! I swear! I don't know who leaked it! I'm just the guy who does the job!"

I close my eyes for a second. This mess gets inside my head. That hacker—Nyx—cost my family dearly before. That hacker... he never left my mind. He has to be working for the Malakovs.

My tech team talks big, but it's not enough. They talk about firewalls, encryption, backdoors. Words. I need a face. A real name, a real address. A bullet.

I open my eyes. My calm is dangerously close to running out. "After years with the Malakovs, you don't know their top hacker, Anton?"

"I... I don't know! I don't know who's behind it all! I just got orders, a few lines of code... I'm not the brain, I'm just the arm!"

I let out a cold laugh. "A useless arm. Is that the best you've got?" I raise my cigar. The tip glows red. "I don't deal with useless arms."

I give Luca a nod. He understands. He raises the iron bar again, and Anton lets out a whimper of despair. I lean forward, watching, analyzing every movement, every contraction of pain in the man's body.

I don't take pleasure in the pain of others. Despite the brutality, I remind myself this is the only language they understand. It's necessary.

The dull, metallic thud of the iron bar meeting bone is familiar.

"He's got nothing," I say as Anton twitches on the floor. "He doesn't know shit."

Luca pants, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. "He's a piece of shit, but he seems genuinely scared of what he doesn't know."

I nod, my eyes still on Anton's body. I trust Luca's instincts. He's a good reader of people. Not of minds, but of fear. Anton's trembling confirms his fear; a sign he's genuine. He's not lying, or at least not entirely. Which doesn't change the fact that he's still useless.

"Get him out of here," I order. "I don't want to see his face again. Solve the problem."

Luca and another one of my men, Marco, drag Anton out of the room. He's unconscious now, a dead weight. I crush the cigar in the crystal ashtray.

I lean back, knowing that as long as the leak remains, my world remains vulnerable, and I won't rest until I find the root and break it. Frustration is eating at me. How do you catch someone who leaves no trail?

The door opens again, and Sal, my lanky, tired-looking cybersecurity head, comes in. He definitely doesn't look the part, but he's been with this family for long enough.

"Anything, Sal?" I ask, not looking at him. I see him approaching in my peripheral vision.

He stammers when he speaks to me, as if we haven't known each other for years. "M-Maybe. Ruslan found something... atypical."

"Atypical how?"

"We went through Anton's computers, hard drives, the cloud. Nothing directly links to the source of the leak. But Ruslan, he was in the logs of a server Anton used now and then. And there, well hidden, was some ASCII art."

I sigh. I'm not in the mood for this. "And what the fuck is ASCII art?"

"It's a picture made with letters and symbols, an image formed by text. And Ruslan noticed something. It wasn't just any art. It was a code. A hidden pattern."

I lean forward. "A code. What does that have to do with our problem?"

"Ruslan was about to give up, Mr. Dante. But in college, I wrote a program that scans for patterns in what looks like random digital data. It functions like a fine-toothed comb. This ASCII art contained a distinct pattern, nearly like a digital signature. Deep within the tangled symbols was a repeating pattern. Like a subliminal message. And when I managed to isolate and decrypt that pattern... it formed the words 'find me.'"

He spoke so quickly and hesitantly that I could barely keep up. Details aren't important now. The message, however, interests me. "Who the hell left this fucking message?"

"He used a 64-character grid, which is kind of unusual... in the source code, he left spaces as 0xA0 instead of normal spaces, and that's not standard... which tells me he wrote this on a specific machine, probably a Unix terminal with a custom locale, w-which would match other service patterns from Nyx..."

The name. Nyx. The ghost that haunts my reports—that's Nyx.

"Fucking Nyx."

"It's his brand, Mr. Volkov. It's very specific, and we can exploit it."

I stand up. Sal takes a cautious step back. "How the hell is some stupid digital art supposed to lead me to a ghost?"

"I-I narrowed the search by cross-referencing it with entry logs on the Onion network mirrors, and I ran a script that looks for this specific encoding pattern, a-and I ran the parser on the last 72 hours of access on the relay nodes he used, and there's a terminal pattern with the same encoding parameters with a specific local DNS showing up three times—"

I rub my temple. Too much technical detail. "Sal."

He stops talking instantly and drops his gaze, realizing he's crossed a line.

"The summary," I demand. "In terms I understand. We have this Nyx's DNA. And we can use it to hunt the bastard. Is that it or not?"

Sal nods, swallowing hard. "Yes. That's exactly it, Mr. Volkov. We can. It's his fingerprint."

"Good," I say. "Then start hunting. I want this son of a bitch. I want him before he even thinks he can hide behind a screen."

And I always get what I want. No matter how elusive, I'll find him in the end.

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THREE

LEO

THE SMELL of garlic and tomato sauce hangs in the aisle. Torture. The neighborhood supermarket is always a battle, and today the aroma of frozen lasagna, the same one I ate last week and the week before, is particularly unbearable. My stomach rumbles. It's boredom. Begging for something.

The fluorescent lights hum. The constant noise mixes with the shuffle of shopping carts and the murmur of voices. Women with their apathetic husbands, children whining for candy. All so predictable. The shelves are organized in perfect rows, each product in its place, waiting to be consumed. I grab the usual lasagna, a package of generic cookies, and a cheap energy drink. The highlight of my Saturday night.

At the checkout, the purple-haired lady who's always there smiles. Her smile is tired and never genuine. She asks if I found everything. I answer with a monosyllabic "yes." She wishes me a good weekend. I wish for death.

The automatic door opens with a hiss. The streets are emptier now that it's cold; shadows stretch long under flickering streetlights, silent and forlorn. Just the sound of passing cars and, in the distance, the siren of an ambulance. The routine. The same old shit.

I put the groceries in my backpack, the familiar weight of the lasagna and the energy drink. I step onto the gloomy sidewalk, quiet and cold beneath my feet. The street lights flicker at irregular intervals, in lapses of consciousness. Like me, thinking about nothing. Wishing for something.

That's when the black car appeared. No fanfare. No squealing tires. Just... there. A dark SUV with tinted windows. It pulled up beside me. There was no one around. The street was strangely silent.

The passenger door opens. The man emerging from the car is large, immovable, his face set in a stone mask that leaves no room for mercy. He doesn't say a word. He just looks at me. His eyes are impassive, empty like a killer's, but somehow familiar, like someone who wouldn't hesitate to end you.

My backpack is ripped from my hand before I can even register the movement. The energy drink rolls out, bouncing on the sidewalk before coming to a stop. There's no time to think. His hand clamps onto my arm with an iron grip. The second large man pulls me into the car, and before I can resist, a cold bag is thrown over my head.

The two men pull me into the car. There's no screaming or resistance, just an electric shock that runs through my body as the adrenaline bubbles up. The dull thud of my head against the car's ceiling. The smell of new leather and disinfectant. And then, the shove into the back seat. I know better than to struggle, to fight men who could kill anything with a pulse with their bare hands, because every hour of my life has been spent in front of a blue-light-emitting screen, corroding my vision bit by bit, in a body fueled by chemicals that will probably kill me before I'm thirty. I wouldn't know how to land a punch on anything or anyone.

The door slams shut. My wrists cinched tight with plastic zip ties.

My breathing starts to quicken. Something I haven't felt in a long time —a nervous tingle, the only adrenaline my medication can't block. The smell of new leather gets stronger. And then, a faint scent of cigar smoke, and someone talking on the phone.

"We got him, boss."

The car lurches forward. I can feel the movement, the sway on an uneven, bumpy road. My bound hands start to sweat. My heart hammers against my chest, a drumbeat echoing in my ears.

This is it.

This is what gets me out of the boredom.

THE SMELL OF NEW LEATHER GROWS STRONGER. THE CIGAR SMOKE, ONCE subtle, is now a persistent echo. My head still throbs from slamming into the car ceiling—a welcome distraction. The world is a grainy black screen with a bag over my head. I feel the rough ridges of the plastic zip ties digging into my skin, snug but not cutting the circulation. They don't want to hurt me. Not yet.

I wonder who they are. I've made a lot of enemies in this short life. I do good work, though it's rarely appreciated, especially since it mostly involves leaking private information and breaking into secured networks. Whoever this is, they're the first, and that's a surprise I wanted. I've been expecting this moment, almost from the start. Constantly. It's late, sure—but better late than never. Better than sitting in that shitty chair fixing Chad's broken code.

The car keeps moving beneath me. The turns get sharper, and the asphalt grows rougher. I feel the vehicle climb a steep ramp, then take a hard right. The sound of the tires changes from a constant hum to a muffled drag, like we're driving over gravel or packed dirt. Familiar territory—rural farms and abandoned warehouses for anyone who's been near those places. Cliché. Effective.

The car comes to an abrupt halt. Silence crashes in—thick, total. No distant honks, no engines passing by. Just my own breathing, suddenly too loud. The door on my side opens, and the night's cold hits me, denser than street cold, tinged with mold and concrete. Basement air.

A strong hand grabs my arm—the same that pulled me into the car—and yanks me out. The soles of my worn shoes meet uneven ground—first gravel, then asphalt beneath my feet.

I hear a big, heavy door creak open. Metal. An iron gate. The sound echoes in the damp, heavy interior—metallic and oppressive. Smells like mildew and rusted metal—old blood. A possibility my routine-numbed mind finds intriguing.

I'm dragged forward. My feet scrape the ground. A door opens, then shuts behind me. Then another. And another. Each one locking with a dry click, that same locking sound over and over. Each click another layer of isolation. A maze of doors and darkness.

The ground beneath me changes again—smooth concrete now. I can hear the echo of my own steps. Theirs too. That echo says: large space. It's empty. A warehouse, definitely. Or a storage facility. The adrenaline I felt in

the car settles now into a low hum, a slow burn of anticipation. This is what I want. What I chase. What makes me feel something.

Suddenly, I'm shoved. I hit the ground—my hip slams into the concrete, knocking the air out of me. My hands, tied behind my back, absorb part of the fall, but my elbow hits hard. That'll bruise, no doubt. But ignoring pain is an old trick. I ignore it. I ignore the electric jolt up my spine.

The zip ties around my wrists hold. The blindfold stays put. And it's cold.

Footsteps move away. No voices. No whispers. Just that fading sound until it's gone. That silence—I haven't heard it since I left the hum of the office lights and Chad's miserable sighs.

I'm alone. Somewhere. In the dark.

My muscles are still tense, but not from fear. It's a different kind of tension. Aware. Ready. My mind's already mapping the space, guessing dimensions, temperature, possibilities. Not for escape—I'm not the panicking type. I'm the pattern-seeking type. Even in the dark.

How much time passes? Minutes? Hours? I can't tell. No natural light, no outside sounds. I breathe deep, trying to catch more details. More smells. A warmth begins to bloom low in my stomach, strange and stubborn. My body reacting to the floor, the adrenaline—and that. That familiar tingling my meds try to smother, that still flares up sometimes at the first sign of pain.

It's a warehouse. Big. Empty. And I'm on the floor.

My body begins to relax, despite the awkward position. That persistent tingling in my wrists becomes a cruel pulse—reminding me exactly where I am, what's been done to me. Of what I'm doing here. That warmth now pools lower, in my groin—a quiet, persistent buzz I know too well.

The anticipation sparks. Subtle. Twisted.

What will they do to me?

The question doesn't come from fear. It comes from hunger.

My skin sticks to the dirty, grimy floor. And I feel it. Every speck of dust, every bit of rust—reminding me how far from home I am, and how absurdly alive I feel.

A kick to the gut? A dry slap across the face, sharp enough to make me laugh? An improvised whip made of old phone wires lashing down my back until my spine sings?

Yes.

An interrogation? With knives, maybe. Pliers. A chainsaw, just to scare me—or, hell, maybe to actually use. I've seen the movies. Always lacked eroticism. Maybe a strong hand gripping my jaw, asking, "You gonna talk, or moan louder?"

Fuck. Maybe it'll be nothing. Maybe just a bullet. In the dark. To the back of the head. A cold execution. Almost merciful. That has its charm too. The surrender. The final offering. Hot blood soaking the collar, mouth hanging open in silence.

Anything to shake me out of this lukewarm, tasteless life.

And then—I hear it.

Footsteps.

Not like before. Not the men who brought me here. These are different. Slower. Heavier.

Let them kill me. Let them use me. Let them tear me apart.

Someone's coming.

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CHAPTER II

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FOUR

DANTE

RAGE CONSUMES ME.

Nyx—that son of a bitch—not only breached my systems and bled me dry of millions but also left me that damn ASCII art. A "find me" note, cynical in the way only a sick mind could think was clever. And hell, I did find him. But not before my guys, led by Sal, turned his little world inside out.

While I was giving final orders, Sal and his team were unraveling Nyx's digital trail. Every byte, every log, every digital footprint he thought he'd erased—they found it. They uncovered surveillance footage, bank transactions, internet records—everything. And here's the worst part: the bastard wasn't an easy mark. Even the most mundane bits of his personal data were locked up tight, encrypted under layers that made my so-called "experts" break into a sweat. No active social media, no simple online history. Hunting him was like chasing an invisible ghost—flickering in the shadows—straining my eyes.

And with every encrypted file, every digital wall, my rage grew. The fact that this little shit was good at hiding, smug in his obscurity, infuriated me.

And now... he's just meters away.

My footsteps echo through the warehouse. Luca trails behind. The stench of mold and concrete clogs my throat, and the moment I open the

door, it's tainted by something else. A hint of sweetness. A misplaced perfume.

There he is. Nyx.

Back to us, hands cuffed behind him, a black sack still over his head. He doesn't look like much. Average height. Slim. Clothes wrinkled and grimy from the grab. Could be any nobody dragged off the street.

Difference is, this nobody waltzed through my systems, danced through my secrets, and now holds my family's future between his fingers—fingers he's about to lose if he doesn't start cooperating.

"Get that off his head," I bark at Luca, sharper than I meant to.

I want to see the face of the man who's making my life hell. I want to see fear in his eyes when he looks at me.

Luca doesn't disappoint. One brutal tug, and the sack is off.

"Lift him."

Luca grabs the guy by the hair, his ebony strands clutched in one rough hand, and yanks him upright, forcing him to his knees. Nyx grunts. A long, low sound. Almost like a sigh. Weird.

My eyes lock on him.

Young. Shockingly young. Early twenties, maybe thirty at a stretch. Sharp jaw, pointed chin. Curly black hair, messy. Skin pale and nearly translucent under the faint beam of light slicing through the ceiling. Light scratches mark his face where the sack scraped skin. His cheeks are flushed. Warmth radiates from his face and neck where Luca's hold strains him upright.

And he's not scared.

He looks… feverish.

His eyes—unnervingly light, some shade between gray and blue—blink painfully against the light.

And then, it feels like shit is getting weird.

There's no shock. No visceral fear, no soul-deep dread I'm used to seeing in people who cross my path—just *curious*, almost bored eyes. Glazed. Unfocused.

My gaze drops with a predator instinct on autopilot. And stops.

What. The. *Fuck*.

Pushing hard against his worn-out jeans is the unmistakable outline of an erection. Obscene. Tense.

I glance at Luca. His usual poker face is cracked, for the first time in years, with genuine confusion. He looks at the guy, then at me, like we're both stuck in the same fucked-up hallucination.

I look back at Nyx. He doesn't flinch. Doesn't try to hide it. If anything, he meets my stare *head-on*, that ghost of a smirk playing on his lips. Like he's *reveling* in this.

A bitter taste rises in my throat, *disgust* curling inside me as I stare at him, the grotesque proof of whatever twisted game he's playing. But beneath it, something nameless. Something that makes my skin crawl in ways I can't quite explain—*shame* twisting my insides.

This isn't how a hostage behaves. This is not how a man responds when he's face-to-face with someone who could end him with a snap of the fingers.

"Nyx, I presume," I say, keeping my voice steady, pretending I'm not seconds away from short-circuiting.

Nyx tilts his head. That smirk widens just a hair. His voice, calm and teasing, strikes a nerve—enough to make me clench my fists and doubt my grip on control. "Depends who's asking. And what you're offering."

Offering? I kidnapped him. Cuffed him. And he's here, hard as a rock, asking what I have to *offer*?

I stare again at the bulge in his pants, that grotesque, confusing proof. Is this some mindfuck game? Is he *messing* with me?

If so—*fuck*—it's working.

Or maybe he's just insane. Utterly, *irreparably* fucked in the head.

Part of me can't look away.

"You think this is funny, you little shit?"

His eyes glint. "Funny's not the word I'd use. Stimulating, maybe. Alluring."

I've dealt with all kinds of filth in my life. Killers, traitors, full-blown psychos. But never—*never*—someone like him. Someone who seemed to *get off* on being kidnapped. Someone who stared into the abyss and, instead of flinching, *leaned* into it, driven by a madness of his own.

Some twisted, microscopic part of me is curious. A sick need to see how deep this madness goes. To test the edges of the riddle kneeling in front of me.

I force myself to snap out of it. I need *intel*. I need to *break* Nyx, find out who's leaking from the inside.

This entire charade—this *grotesque distraction*—is just noise.

How do you break someone who *wants* to be broken? How do you threaten a man who sees threats as *foreplay*?

I have a horrible feeling that my already complicated life is about to get a lot stranger.

"Who are you working for?" I demand, trying to keep my voice steady, even though I feel like I'm about to explode. "The Malakovs? Did they send you to leak my family's information?"

"I've worked for them before," Nyx says, calmly, almost *teasingly*. "But that's all. Everyone works for everyone these days, mister… ?"

My jaw tightens. He is playing games. "You *dare* to ask my name? You're in *my* warehouse, tied up, and you think you can ask *me* questions?"

"It's only fair I get to know who's in charge." His eyes drop, just for a second, to his pants. That *thing* is still there, undeniable, a pulsing testament to whatever was wrong with him.

I glance at Luca, who's just as confused.

"Take it out of me," Nyx's voice drops to a whisper that makes my skin crawl. "Come on, make me talk. I dare you."

He wants me to get violent. He's practically *begging* for it. And a part of me, the part that deals with *trash* like him every day, wants to give him *exactly* what he asked for. I have to remind myself that this is just a job. *This is just a job.*

Luca's grip on Nyx's hair tightens automatically, pulling his head back even further. Nyx's moan is airy this time, a long drawn-out sound that sounds more like pleasure than pain. He's not normal.

I step closer, my shadow falling over his pale face. "So, Nyx. You like to play games." I reach out, tracing the sharp line of his jaw. He shivers, and a subtle tremor runs through his body. Not from fear. I know that much. This is something else entirely. "Let's see if you're so brave when the stakes are real."

My hand trails down his neck, and I dig my fingers into the flesh below his ear. He gasps, exposing more of his throat, practically *inviting* me.

This infuriates me. He's making it too easy.

"Who are you protecting?" I demand, pressing my thumb hard against a pulse point. His heartbeat hammers under my skin, fast and erratic. "Tell me about the Malakovs. Every single detail."

Nyx lets out a soft sound, a low hum that vibrates through my fingertips. It's a sound of effort. This is not the response I want, this is making him *sing*. And it's starting to piss me off even more.

"I told you," he whispers, his voice strained yet still holding that taunting edge. "Everyone works for everyone. There's nothing to tell that you don't already know."

I repeat to myself. *Just a fucking job.*

"You're lying." My grip around his throat tightens, and he lets out a hiss of breath.

"You're choking me," he says. "Do it harder. Just a bit more."

Enough.

My fist moves of its own accord. The next thing I know, my knuckles hit the sharp corner of his jaw. A dull thud. A loud grunt.

Nyx's head whips to the side as Luca loses his grip.

"That's better." He spits blood onto the concrete floor. His words are slurred now, and I can see the imprints of my fingers already forming on his neck.

"Fuck, you *are* insane," Luca murmurs.

I ignore him, watching Nyx closely. "What do you gain from protecting the Malakovs, huh?"

"I'm not protecting anyone," he says.

I look down. *It* is still there, pressing against the fabric of his pants, unashamed.

"Don't test me, Nyx. Don't you dare fucking test me."

I step on it.

The crunch is sickening. A wet, tearing sound, muffled by denim. He gasps. Not a moan this time, not a tease, but a sharp, ragged inhalation of agony. He doubles over, folding in on himself, hiding his face from me, but I hear it—a strangled, high-pitched noise, like a trapped animal.

Finally.

"Is this what turns you on, huh?" I snarl. The heel of my boot crushes down. Nyx whimpers in a choked sob ripping from his throat, transforming suddenly into a fragile thing against the raw pressure I exert. His sweat, slick and glistening under the sickly yellow lights, beads on his brow, fighting to contain the agony, and each muscle in his trembling frame strains.

Luca shifts beside me. I don't look at him, but I can feel his stare. He's seen a lot of fucked-up things, but *this*? This is new.

Nyx is shaking now, tremors racking his whole body, his breath coming in short, harsh pants. He's a mess. *Broken*. I feel it. This is what I needed. This is something he can't turn into pleasure.

I lift my foot.

The silence that follows is broken only by Nyx's ragged breathing. He stays hunched, trembling, his face still hanging down. I wait for the collapse, for the true breakdown, for the sobs that never came before. I wait for him to finally *beg*.

Instead, a soft sound slips from his lips.

My eyes snap down. That obscene outline, pressing *harder* now against the denim. *It's impossible*. His cheeks are flushed crimson, even from this angle, and a sheen of sweat gleams on his exposed neck. He's panting, almost *humming*, and then he slowly, *so* slowly, straightens up.

His eyes, still a startling mix of gray and blue, fix on mine.

A deep, almost *reverent* awe.

And that *thing*... it *pulses*.

"I'll tell you," he whispers, his voice hoarse, ragged, yet filled with a raw, desperate eagerness that makes my blood run cold. He shifts on his knees, a movement that seems designed to *offer* himself, to *please*. "I'll tell you everything."

My triumph shatters.

Luca makes a choking sound beside me, and I feel his bewilderment.

This isn't broken. This isn't *normal*. This is... an entirely new kind of *fucked up*. And suddenly, the rage I felt is replaced by something else. A crawling *unease*. This is a *monster* I can't understand. And he's looking at me like I'm his *salvation*.

I force my voice out. "Tell me about the Malakovs. Every single detail."

Nyx doesn't flinch away. He leans into it. "The Malakovs again?" His voice is strained, but still holds that low, taunting hum. "I didn't lie to you, mister. I've worked for them once. It was a one-time gig that paid well. Like anyone else who pays. But I don't work *for* them. I work for whoever signs the check."

My jaw clenches so hard my teeth ache. "You were the *only one* in all my family's history capable of breaching my systems. The *only one* who

could leak my family's information. And you're telling me you're just a fucking *freelancer*? That you don't work for them *now?"*

"Yes, mister," Nyx says, his eyes fixed on mine, like a faithful dog. "I just... do the job. If you want, I can do a job for *you*."

I stare at him. This is... *nothing*. A ghost. A tool. No loyalty, no master. Just a void I can't punish, can't *threaten*, that *wants* what I'm doing to him.

I clench my hands into fists, useless. If he's not working for the Malakovs, then who the *fuck* is behind this?

The rage builds again. It's a different kind, colder, because this target, this *problem*, is shapeless.

My gaze drops to Nyx's lap one last time. The denim is pulled taut, the fabric stretched almost to breaking point over that insistent bulge. His face, still flushed crimson, is tipped up, a ghost of a smile playing on his swollen lips. He's panting, silent, but his eyes are screaming. *Please*.

Fuck this.

"Luca. Let's go." My voice is flat, devoid of any emotion I can fake. I turn on my heel, stalking towards the door, the chill of the warehouse suddenly not cold enough to cool the burning disgust and confusion in my gut. If I stay one more second in this room, I will do something I regret. I know it too well—the uncontrollable rage is *too familiar.*

I won't allow myself to turn this man into an unrecognizable mass of meat no matter how much he presses.

"Where are you going?" Nyx's voice sounds hoarse and reedy. I don't look back. I can't.

Luca hesitates for a second, then quickly follows, leaving the hacker kneeling there, still bound.

Still *hard*.

MY MEN ARE SCATTERED, SOME AT THE LARGE TABLE, OTHERS LEANING against the walls, trying to look busy but all stealing glances at me. Luca is beside me, his usual stone face a shade lighter with... what? Confusion? Disgust? They'd heard enough through the thin walls, enough of the sounds and the lack of screams, enough of Luca's clipped report. The details didn't need to be spelled out.

"So," Marco, one of my capos, a bulky man with a permanent scowl, clears his throat. He's always the one to state the obvious. "The kid's... a weird one."

"Understatement of the fucking year," Grigory mutters, taking a long drag from his cigarette.

I slam my hand on the table, the sound echoing in the sudden quiet. "He's not the problem right now! The problem is he says he's not working for the Malakovs. Which means someone *else* is pulling the strings. Someone who knows how to use a ghost."

"Still," Marco says, ignoring my outburst, "the way he took that... you know." He gestures vaguely with his chin towards the direction of the room where we left Nyx. "Most people, they scream. They beg. He was… happy?"

"Happy and *hard*," Luca adds, flat. He doesn't look at me. He doesn't have to.

A low chuckle comes from the corner where Ruslan is cleaning his fingernails with a knife. "Man, I hear that's a special kind of crazy. You just left him, boss? Probably got the worst blue balls of his life right now."

"That shit hurts, boss," one of the younger guys, Vinny, pipes up from near the door, nodding in agreement with Ruslan. "Like a toothache in your dick. Used to get 'em bad back in the day, if a girl played too much."

Ruslan adds, "Worse than a punch to the gut, sometimes. You can't think about anything else. Maybe *that's* how you break him, huh? Leave him to stew in that pain."

My blood runs cold. *Blue balls*. The thought had completely escaped me in my frustration. And the casual way they talk about it, like it's just another Tuesday.

"That's a form of torture, indeed… boss, leaving him was a good call—"

"Enough!" I roar, cutting him off. My fist hits the table again, harder this time, rattling the cheap plastic cups. "What the *fuck* did you want me to do, Ruslan? *Suck him off* to make him feel better?"

The room goes silent. Ruslan freezes, his knife halfway to his face. Marco's eyes widen, and even Luca subtly flinches. They look terrified. The disgust in my voice, the raw edge of my anger, it's a *warning*. They should watch their fucking tone around me.

I pace, running a hand through my hair. "I'm not giving him what he wants. Not *ever*."

The shame of having that thought, even for a split second, burns.

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FIVE

LEO

IT WAS GLORIOUS.

The pain—the sharp, relentless kind—I accept it as part of this ordeal. It's not what I fantasized at first; in fact, getting *this hard* with just my wrists bound wasn't the plan. I thought I'd have a little more self-control. But the adrenaline… fuck, it reminds me that real blood runs in my veins. A heart still pumps blood through my body. After everything.

And that man…

Big. Strong, angry hands. A face that looked like he would break my neck for sport. Having him bury his fist in my skin, gripping my cheeks tightly, was an experience so far removed from my mundane daily cubicle.

The disgust he looked at me with shouldn't turn me on like this.

And then that wet, breaking sound, the sole of his shoe between my legs… Pressing. Twisting.

Pain never bothered me. Not like with most people. My tolerance has always been high, and that helps and hinders me in equal measure. Things that should scare most don't faze me. Daily, idiotic things. Getting beaten. Falling from high places. Being run over.

I don't look both ways before crossing the street. I don't wear a seatbelt. I flirt with the edge of the balcony. Everything seems like an old, desaturated, colorless movie. The most that will happen is the nothingness of nonexistence. Fear disappeared long ago—dulled by years of bRuslandiazepine use, blanking out the need to feel anything at all.

Then, suddenly, dopamine. My veins are liquid endorphin the moment that man steps between my legs.

First, the crushing pain. He really wanted to hurt me. Then, the notion that he was compressing me. Pressing. Touching.

My pants are damp. I can see a dark stain forming, and the torture of not being able to touch myself makes me even harder.

It's vibrating. My groin is too hot. It still hurts. The unalleviated vasocongestion doesn't help.

I try to slump forward and thrust my hips. Humiliating, like a bitch in heat. I almost wish the big man with the strong hands would come back here and see me like this. That he'd spit on me, kick me while telling me how ridiculously pathetic I am. Call me a freak again.

I grunt. The thought makes me hotter.

I try to rub against the floor. I shiver at the contact. But I need more friction. I try again, and the chilly sensation of the floor against my pants makes me groan. It's good at first—I imagine him. I recreate the scenario in my head. His shoe pressing my cock, stimulating it like a humiliation. Asking me if I get off on this. And yes, fuck. I do.

The floor doesn't sustain me for long. It's not enough. It provides a crude rub that only made my spine shiver with the temperature shock, and nothing more than reigniting his memory.

If he had kept his shoe there, if he had moved it just a little more… what would he say if I came in my pants because of him? What face would he make?

My cock hurts.

I turn on the floor, lying on my side on the same cold tile that gave me shivers, now warming up with my heat.

Yes. He'll be back. And I'm still hard for him. So hard.

I stare at the door. Until he returns, I can't keep rolling around and reliving those sensations. There's a chance I could come just from this, and I can't, not now. Not away from his eyes.

To distract myself, I think. I try to make connections.

He wanted to know about the Malakovs. Mafia family I worked for a while ago. They paid well, I remember that, and they were screwing over a rival family. Must be this one; these men must be the Volkovs.

And the big one… the boss, I imagine. Which of the Volkov brothers? Dante or Dmitry? I don't remember which one is older—just that one of

them, probably *Dante*, was born to an Italian mother—and I've never seen their faces before. I knew them by names and the information I leaked at the time, and that doesn't matter to me anymore. They weren't interesting. They were purely about business—deals and transactions devoid of emotion.

I lose track of time, the minutes stretching into an indefinite silence. I press my face against the textured floor and focus on its roughness. The erection doesn't fade, doesn't go away while his eyes—Mr. D—flash unfairly through my head. They are dark, hateful, enraged eyes, under thick eyebrows that slant down forcefully. His arms must be the size of my thighs.

The scraping of metal on the floor pulls me back. I look up to see Mr. D and his tattooed assistant looming over me.

Mr. D is annoyed. It's obvious in everything; he exudes hatred, and I hope he'll pour it on me. I don't try to stand. I'm where I want to be.

He looks down at me.

"Get up," he says, with a nervous growl that scrapes his throat.

I push myself forward onto my knees once more. I spread my legs to minimally relieve the burning between them, which pulses as I see Mr. D again. I enjoy that he gives me orders.

"You said you'd tell me everything," he says, approaching.

"I will," I say. I want to be useful and reward him for bringing me back to life again. "Just tell me what to do, mister."

I like how the contempt in my voice when I say 'mister' only fuels his anger—so fucking hot. The jaw clenched, with even more prominent curves; the dark eyes, furrowed in hatred; the veins that jumped from his muscular arms as he clenched his fists.

"Don't play games with me, fucker."

He doesn't understand what I want or who I am. That's obvious. But he's trying to decipher me, to find which buttons to push to break me.

The subordinate behind Mr. D has a wary expression. I see the half-open door from where they came and the curious heads peeking at us, and I hope I'm being a good show to pull them out of the inherent monotony of a routine. It's curious that I like this. I like being a piece that doesn't fit.

Mr. D turns to the flunky. Only then do I notice he's holding a folder. His gaze, full of hateful intent, pinpoints me again with menace. A delicious shiver sweeps through my body. I watch his rough hands unfastening the

folder's security latches and the prospect of violence testing my limits elevates me.

A weapon? I hope so. Pliers. Something that shocks. An iron bar, a machete, a saw, restraints…

I have to suppress a moan.

He opens the folder. I bite my lip, trying to steel myself for what's to come. But then his hand reaches into the folder, takes something out, and doesn't pull out a weapon. No variation of that. He pulls out a thick stack of papers, and simply throws them in my direction. A few hundred sheets of sulfite paper float in the air before falling disordered onto the floor.

I peek at them. What the hell is that, code?

The burning between my legs diminishes. Less vibrant. Codes.

"You want to be useful?" says Mr. D, "Analyze these. Tell me where the Malakovs hit us. Tell me how they got in. Every single vulnerability you find."

I stare at the papers, then at him. He's not going to touch me. He's not going to hurt me. He's giving me work. Codes to review, the same fucking thing from that gray cubicle, and it's disappointing. This is true torture. Looking for more commas and open brackets. More faulty logic.

The adrenaline drains away.

I laugh.

I laugh because this soul-deadening work, this endless routine, follows me everywhere. I don't want to fix other people's shit.

Mr. D looks even more confused by my laughter.

"What do I get for it?" I say. I recognize myself again, and that's bad. My usual self is just bored and fed up.

"You get to keep breathing, you little shit. That's what you get."

A shiver runs down my spine—small but significant. It's a crumb. I like that Mr. D threatens me, and I like that inflexible, grave tone of voice.

Right. Guess I owe him for the hard-on I haven't had in a while. I move my aching shoulders. My wrists are still tied behind my back.

"Aren't you going to untie me?" I say.

Mr. D's gaze thrills me again.

"No."

"Curious choice to print your codes."

"Why would we give a hacker a computer?"

I smile. He has a point.

Mr. D glares at me for another long moment, narrowing his eyes, then turns. "Luca."

So that's the tattooed guy's name.

Luca nods and follows his boss out. The door scrapes shut, and there's silence. Just me, the crisp concrete, and hundreds of useless, boring pages.

My wrists ache, the plastic zip biting into my skin. The dull throb between my legs is an annoying reminder of pleasure denied.

I'm alone.

Completely and utterly alone with my thoughts, and this mountain of dead trees. This is not what I signed up for. Not the kind of torture I craved. This is just… work. The same soul-crushing boredom I tried to escape.

I sigh. Loudly. Hoping some guard somewhere hears it and is annoyed. It's a pathetic act of rebellion, even for me.

I'll do their stupid work. If only to get back to Mr. D and demand real payment.

I CLUMSILY CRAWL AROUND THE SCATTERED SHEETS, SORTING THEM BY FILE names, squinting at the tiny fonts. Network diagrams. Firewall logs. Backup scripts. It's all there, a digital fingerprint of their operations. My brain, despite the aching lack of stimulation, still solves the puzzle. It's a habit. A reflex. A way to occupy the void.

Hours crawl by. Or maybe minutes. Time is meaningless here. My neck cramps. My eyes sting from staring at the small print. The faint smell of stale printer ink fills my nose. No one comes. No one offers water. Just the frigid silence, and the monotonous drone of my own thoughts, sifting through lines of code.

This is what real hell feels like. *Blandness*.

Then, buried deep in a routine backup script, I see it.

Not a glaring vulnerability, not a sloppy backdoor left by a rookie. No. This is something else. It's precise. Elegant, insidious. A subtle call that makes my blood thrum.

This is interesting. And it's not an external attack. It's internal.

I don't know how much more time passes after that until Mr. D comes back.

A metallic scrape. The door opens.

He and Luca, again, looking even more irritated than before, if that's possible. Mr. D's eyes, dark and heavy, fall on me, still hunched over the scattered papers. He probably expects me to be asleep, or crying, or he's disappointed I'm not hard anymore. I can feel the shift in my pants—the insistent throb that was there before is gone. Replaced by a dull ache.

He'll hate that.

"Took you long enough," I say. I don't move, don't even try to hide the smirk that wants to creep onto my face. "I found it. You've got a rat."

He furrows his brows, and it takes him a moment to take his eyes off my crotch. He steps inside, pulling the door shut behind him. This is the real conversation.

"What are you talking about?" he demands.

I finally look up, meeting his gaze. "You're getting bled. Every Tuesday. And it's someone on your payroll. Someone with access to your core systems." I look down, aiming at a specific page "This *rsync* backup you're using is calling an external domain. Sending sensitive data out. It's a professional job, disguised as a maintenance task."

Mr. D's eyes narrow, dark and heavy.

"Show me," he growls in a mixture of rage and disbelief.

I don't bother with words. My wrists are still cinched tight behind my back, so I just tilt my head, pointing my chin towards the pile of papers on the floor, specifically at the one I just mentioned. It's page 73, if he bothers to look.

He stares at me for a long moment, trying to bore holes into my skull, trying to find fear. He won't. I don't have it.

Finally, he snaps his gaze to the papers. He doesn't move towards them, just glares as if the paper itself might bite him.

Mr. D, however, doesn't utter a word. His eyes, which moments ago seemed intent on burning me alive, now simply drift away. He turns his back on me and walks out of the room, the metal door groaning in a searing protest as he shoves it open. He doesn't close it. Just leaves.

Luca stares after him the whole way, rooted to the spot. I can feel his gaze saying, *what do I do with this lunatic?* Mr. D didn't give him any orders, and his desperate discomfort is palpable once Luca's eyes fall back on me.

The silence is heavy and strange. I stare at him. He stares back.

The cold of the cement feels more intense on my knees, and my hands, still bound behind my back, tingle.

He's perplexed. He doesn't know what to do at all. His eyes are fixed on me as they would be on some caged supernatural entity. He glances at my crotch. Then at my face. He frowns. Too bad I can't give him the show of a hard hostage anymore.

I almost smile. *Almost*. My body isn't cooperating much with the displays of dominance right now. That insistence, that familiar warmth… it's gone. I don't think I could stay hard analyzing code and picking apart other people's screw-ups. I preferred it when they punched my face and stepped on me.

Luca takes a step to the side, then another. He doesn't know if he should guard me closely or keep his distance. He's a mafia man—of *action*, not of babysitting an insane hostage. But, if I didn't know better, I'd say he's even *scared* of me.

Then, we hear it.

First, a muffled shuffle of heavy footsteps coming from the corridor, mixed with a low, almost inaudible hum that I identify immediately. Two voices murmur, one higher pitched, the other deep and impatient. From the door Mr. D left open, a man with glasses appears.

Luca straightens up, hesitant. The noise grows louder, and then Mr. D himself emerges in the doorway, pushing the bespectacled man forward. He stumbles over his own feet and almost drops the laptop—with a Linux penguin sticker—he's carrying. Behind him, another man, also carrying a thin, powerful notebook.

They reek of disinfectant and anxiety, these two library rats. Nothing like Mr. D's brutes.

"On the floor. NOW," Mr. D orders. The two nerds freeze, terrified. "You know what happens to those who waste my time, don't you?"

The man in glasses, already thin, shrinks even further. The other one pales completely. They stumble to their knees, clumsy, fumbling to open their laptops with trembling hands. Their fingers look like jelly as they try to power up the machines.

"I want that vulnerability. Now. In front of me. Every line of code." Mr. D steps closer, his gigantic shadow swallowing them whole. "If I have to repeat myself... if I have to wait one minute longer than necessary... I will use these laptops to break every bone in your hands. Understood?"

The nerds' shoulders hunch. One of them swallows hard, his throat clicking. I feel a tingle, a prickle of something akin to pleasure. Oh, if all that rage were directed at me… threats sound so sweet in his voice.

The man in glasses types something quickly. "The firewall logs look normal, Mr. Dante."

I chuckle. So Mr. D is *Dante*. Probably the older one.

"You won't find anything in the firewall," I say. Mr. D's eyes snap to me, blazing. "It's always the arrogant ones who use Linux. You can tell by the way he types." The man in glasses glares at me. Mr. D doesn't give a damn about my observation. "The vulnerability isn't on the surface. It's something disguised as routine. Page seventy-three, backup script." I nod with my chin toward the scattered papers. "Around the middle of the page, in line 400."

The man in glasses, visibly irritated but too scared to retort, starts leafing through the mountain of printed papers scattered on the floor. "But how do you—"

"He said page seventy-three," Mr. D cuts him off without hesitation. His eyes, for a split second, fix on mine. The same rage as before, the unpronounced confusion, and a challenge. It's the hotter thing that's happened since these codes ruined the night.

The man in glasses sighs, defeated, and begins to scroll the laptop screen, following the physical pages the other, pale one, was already trying to organize and read.

The two scan the lines of code with inefficient haste. They crumple the papers on the floor, their breaths held captive in their throats amidst the frantic clicking of the keyboard and the muffled whir of the laptops' fans. Mr. D's silence manages to be more menacing than shouts, and he doesn't take his eyes off them.

Dante scrapes the tip of his polished shoe on the floor, stopping millimeters from the man in glasses' hand. "You have three seconds to tell me what you're seeing, or I will rip every tooth from your mouth."

The man swallows hard. "Mr. Dante, I… I don't… I don't see anything unusual here. The backup script is standard, line 400 is a… a cache cleanup command."

I make an effort to sit cross-legged on the floor, leaning my tired back against the wall. The two library rats flinch even at that. "You reek of disinfectant and you're unqualified," I say. "It's not line 400; it's what *should* be on line 400. Look for an empty function."

Dante's eyes turn to me. The rage is still there—I suspect it never leaves his face—but the interest isn't just a spark anymore. The man in glasses, almost in a panic, scrolls the screen forcefully, nearly abrading the laptop's touchpad. The other one, finally understanding, shoves the papers aside and leans over his partner's laptop.

He says, "Here, Mr. Dante! The function is empty. It shouldn't be."

Dante doesn't look at the nerds. He looks at me. Serious.

He pulls his cell phone from the inner pocket of his jacket. Without a word, Dante gestures to Luca. The hulking man strides forward, grabbing one of the nerds by the collar, hoisting him to his feet.

"Get them out," Dante orders. "And make sure no one breathes a word of this."

Luca drags the second nerd, who practically trips over himself in his haste to escape. The two library rats are shoved out of the room, holding their laptops as if it were their most beloved thing. Maybe it really was.

The heavy door thuds shut, and I'm once more alone in the sudden silence.

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SIX

DANTE

TWO IDIOTS. *Incompetent*. Frustration boils in my veins. Not with them, not truly. They're just tools. My rage is more directed at whatever forced me to *need* them. And at the pathetic distraction still tied up, projecting a satisfaction that irritates me, and, to my disgust, intrigues me.

Ignoring Nyx for a second—because if I looked at him any longer, my goddamn patience would explode—I dial Dmitry's number. My youngest brother. Cooler-headed, less prone to punching a motherfucker until he stops breathing.

"Dmitry," I say, without greeting him. "We found the vulnerability. It's a backup script. Nyx was right."

A brief silence on the other end of the line. Dmitry isn't easily surprised, but I can feel his tension. "The New York hacker? How does he know about this?"

My eyes turn back to my office door. Nyx is probably still in that same position, slumped against the wall, motionless, like a sculpture of provocation. His pants stained with his sickening reactions to pain.

At least he wasn't hard anymore.

"It's a long story," I reply, my voice hoarser than I wanted. "I want the perimeter reinforced, triple the patrols. No one comes in or out without my permission. This place needs to be a tomb."

"Understood," Dmitry says. "Do you need me to come there?"

Dmitry's presence would be useful. He's quick, efficient. But the thought of pulling him from whatever he was doing, just to see *Nyx* look at him with the same irritating curiosity he gives me… it's *too much*. I don't want my brother anywhere near that lunatic.

"No," I say. "I'll handle things here. Svetlana's in the country too, so don't worry. Just keep me informed of any suspicious movement. And… prep the jet."

"For what?"

"In case I need a distraction to burn."

I'd love to set fire to something. To imagine Nyx there, his worthless smile melting away.

I hang up before Dmitry can respond. What a nightmare.

I WALK BACK INTO THE ROOM ALONE. LUCA IS OUTSIDE, SUPERVISING security with my other men. *Good*. Fewer witnesses to this aberration.

I push the door open, and the screech of metal against concrete echoes in the warehouse.

Nyx is leaning against the wall, eyes closed and legs crossed. Exactly as when I left. He looks like he's sleeping, but I know he's not.

I bring a sealed bottle of water. He's been here all day, and we haven't given him anything.

He opens his eyes the second my shadow covers him. Those blue-gray eyes, filled with insatiable curiosity. Devoid of the obscenity of pleasure, yet *still obscene*. He's testing my limits. Always.

"You're useful, at least," I say against my own will. It's not a compliment.

I kneel beside him, resting one knee on the dusty floor. I unscrew the bottle cap and tilt it towards his mouth, gripping his cheeks firmly to hold his head in place.

"Drink."

He looks at me with surprise for the first time. It's almost humanizing to know he can still be surprised after everything. Without a word, he stares at the bottleneck, and I tilt the bottle—one gulp. Two. Some water spills from the corner of his mouth, wetting his chin in a thin trickle.

I wipe the drop away with my thumb. The abruptness isn't entirely rage—violence, at this point, is part of me, and his pale skin flushes with the pain, reddening rapidly under the exaggerated pressure.

He then looks at me. His eyes narrow, flicking to my mouth, and heat rises up my neck.

Fuck. He's *enjoying* this. He's *always* enjoying this.

I pull my hand back as if I've touched a parasite. Because that's what happened. This game of his is irritating. And effective.

Nyx wets his lips. "It's surprising, mister. For a man like you, who seems to want to break me every second, this courtesy is unexpected."

Courtesy? It's just water. Nothing more. But the *way* he said it, as if he was reading me... it's something I hate. And, at the same time, respect.

"It's not courtesy," I reply. "You rendered a service. I reciprocate. That's how it works."

It's about owing nothing to anyone. Not even to him.

He tilts his head, and a genuine smile—disarming in its simplicity—spreads across his face. Like anyone else's. Any normal person, far from the shit of the underworld; anyone who wouldn't deserve to be where he is.

"So, you *are* a man of principles, after all," he says. It's bizarre to see fondness in the way he looks at me, and it's the only thing that reminds me I'm not dealing with a civilian, but with a lunatic. "It's true I helped you. You *owe* me."

That cracks and breaks any semblance of normalcy. The son of a bitch. The *audacity*.

My hands clench into fists. I am a man of my word. A man of principles, however fucked up my business may be. I pay for all services rendered, but that he would *demand* it with that tone of voice…

"What do you think you deserve?" I snarl. He makes me doubt my own values. It's true he's not a Malakov, and that he's not directly involved in the current Volkov disaster. But he *has been* before. Helping us now would, at most, make us even, and the greatest reward he could want would be to remain functional, *breathing*, and not slowly wasting away from dehydration.

But, of course, Nyx has other plans.

"You're actually going to ask me?" he says with a hateful smirk.

The smile, once genuine, distorts into something that was pure Nyx—provocative, perverse, and frankly terrifying. I know what's coming. He

won't ask for food, or a bed. He won't ask for fucking freedom. He'll ask for something sick, something that satisfies the ugliness that is his mind.

"I want something unpleasant, mister."

I wait. Almost nervous.

"Give me a slap," Nyx says. He looks at me with downcast eyes, lips parted, cheeks gaining color. "Across the face. Hard."

Sick.

My body freezes. Fuck. It's obvious what *just thinking* about it is doing to him, reverting to his revolting obscenity. The demand is an insult. And a temptation. Because I *want* to wipe that fucking smirk off his face. I *want* to smash his head, I *want* to make him choke on his own blood and regret turning an operation like this into a fucking circus.

I search for a trace of fear, of hesitation, *anything* that wasn't that disturbing devotion. Nothing. Only *anticipation*.

Turning him into a punching bag would only make this something *other* than *part of the job.* It would only make him fucking moan.

The palm of my hand throbs, begging to connect with his skin. Hitting this aberration is giving him exactly what he wants. But the *arrogance* of thinking he can tell me what to do, that he can *demand* something from me, and the sickening way he looks at me…

The dry crack echoes through the warehouse. Loud. My satisfaction of unleashing all the hatred he stirred in me directly onto his face lasts only a few seconds—the time it takes to see the red mark staining his skin, his head snapped to the side with the force of the slap, and the sting in my own palm.

Because, immediately after, comes the moan. A moan of complete pleasure, drawn out, low. And the bulge in his stained pants appears again, a damned rise slowly lifting.

He slowly turns his face back to me. He leans towards me, looks at me with heavy breaths and a face red not just from the mark of my hand, but from heat. He looks at me completely *submissive*.

"Thank you, mister," he whispers, and the sound was more intimate and more provocative than anything he had ever said. His tongue moistens his swollen lips. He wants more. He is waiting, *desiring*, for me to do more.

My hands, almost on their own, shoot out to grab his cheeks with a force that would make anyone scream. *This son of a bitch*. Nyx's lips part under the pressure of my fingers, and he lets out another moan.

"This," I snarl, "was not a reward. This was a *reminder* of who's in charge. You play with me again, and it won't just be a slap."

He bites his lower lip in a gesture that only serves to further fuel my fury. This bastard acts as if I'm flirting with him.

I release him with a shove that sends him stumbling back against the wall. He doesn't complain. He *grunts*. He watches me, his eyes heavy with desire and his breath still heaving.

I turn my back on him and leave, slamming the room door hard enough to make the metal tremble. Outside, Luca checks the radios with the guards, indifferent to the show that just happened. Good.

I walk through the warehouse, ignoring the murmur of my men. The dim light, the smell of metal and dirt—everything seems normal. But *nothing* is normal. The sound of that moan is still in my ears, the feel of his skin under my thumb, the sight of that fucking *bulge*. My blood pulses with an intensity that irritates me. It's not for him. It *cannot* be for him.

That aberration had fucked me over. Not with a weapon, not with a hack, but with a goddamn *slap*. He led me exactly where he wanted just to satisfy a sick fetish. The son of a bitch laughed in silence.

I stop in a darker corner, away from prying eyes. I unclench my fist and look at the palm of my hand. The sting is gone, replaced by a residual tingling. It's the same heavy hand that crushes throats and breaks bones for necessity. And now, it burns with Nyx's *pleasure*.

My mind drags me back to the moment. The immediate flush of red on his pale skin. And that sound. That low, drawn-out moan. It was wrong. Disgusting. And it had echoed in my chest in a way no woman's gasp ever had.

The way he'd leaned into my hand, even after the impact. And the way he'd looked at me, submissive, completely exposed, his lips swollen, begging for more. The bulge. *Goddamn it.* I try to push the image away, but it burns behind my eyelids. His body's response to my violence. It was a need. And that knowledge, that he *needs* this from me, is a venom. It makes my own body respond in ways I hate.

I can't let him forget who's in charge. I can't let *myself* forget the fucking threat he represents.

He is a parasite. A problem. A stain on my operation that I don't know how to clean. And the idea of keeping him close, even if it's just to crush him, is *sickening*.

BILE RISES IN MY THROAT. I NEED A CLEAR MIND TO DEAL WITH THE *TRUE* threat—the rat in my organization, the one feeding information to the Malakovs from under my roof. But that bastard, *Nyx*, has infiltrated me like a disease. Any strategic thought is contaminated by the image of his swollen lips and those obscene eyes.

I spot Luca near the heavy metal gate, speaking softly into a radio. He's a symbol of brute force and unquestioning loyalty—a simple man, without mind games or perversions. Just action.

I walk towards him, my boots thudding against the concrete. Luca straightens, snapping to attention the moment he sees me.

"Sir," he greets.

"The hacker," I say. I force myself to keep my voice flat, devoid of the rage that still simmers beneath my skin. I need to sound decisive. Controlled. "He's a problem."

Luca nods. "A big problem." He pauses, looking into nothing. Definitely replaying the disturbing memories of a hostage getting *hard* from taking a punch. "But he was useful. Found that vulnerability faster than Sal's whole team. Could be an asset."

It's true. He's skilled. Sal, one of the best in the business, looked like a child learning to code next to him. But asset or not, I can't fucking *breathe* near him.

"He's a distraction," I say. "He's driving me *insane*. I can't afford that right now, not with a traitor in our midst. Get rid of him."

Luca hesitates, but nods. He pulls his pistol from the holster hidden by his jacket and disengages the safety, checking the bullets and sighing, as if he's about to do something he doesn't want to.

"To the head?" he says.

Only then do I realize how my words sounded.

It's a sorrowful honor that Luca doesn't hesitate to pull the trigger on my command. A testament to the influence exerted by my family, and, at times, a burden all Volkovs were forced to carry. Just not in this case.

I can't allow myself to kill Nyx with my own hands—*worse* if he's going to *moan* until his last breath. Since I took over my father, our executions have become clean and without unnecessary sadism if no

information had to be extracted by force. Nyx is so sick he must *desire* a bullet to the head.

And part of the reason I wouldn't even truly consider killing him is that he fucked us once and saved us another. We're even.

"No, Luca," I say, gesturing for him to rest the gun. "Just let him go."

Luca freezes. Thinking. When we kidnap someone, that person *deserves* it, and when that person deserves it, they *rarely* survive to tell the tale. Simply letting a hostage go home isn't our practice.

I understand that, however, these are curses of being a just man (and deeply disturbed by the aberration that goes by the name of Nyx).

"Let him go?" Luca says. "After everything? He knows too much. He's seen all our codes, and we don't even know if he told us all the vulnerabilities he found; he's dangerous out there."

"He *is* dangerous," I agree, running a hand through my hair. Nyx is frustrating. "But not like a common enemy. He's... different. Keeping him here is a bigger risk than letting him go." A risk to my control. To my goddamn sanity. "He has no place in our kind of business," I lie. He *does* have a place, no matter how much I hate to admit it—a fucked-up courage, a quick intellect, disregarding his disgusting physical reactions.

I look at Luca, making sure my eyes convey absolute determination.

"Right," Luca murmurs, thoughtfully. "He works in an office. You're right."

I hadn't really paid attention to Sal's reports about his personal life. The office information is new.

An office. That *lunatic*?

I clear my throat. "Get rid of him. Tonight. Take him somewhere remote, a dump, a hotel—fuck it, I don't care. Just get rid of him."

I can't imagine him in formal wear. Wearing a decent suit or polished shoes and passing through the security turnstiles of a multinational corporation.

"Just... dump him, sir? No warning to stay away from the family?"

I'd tell Luca to threaten him. But Nyx would like that.

"He certainly knows that," I murmur. "Just make it clear he doesn't have a place here."

"Affirmative." Luca's face returns to its usual mask, though his bewilderment remains.

I watch him go. I don't understand the hard knot tightening in my stomach—I'm doing the right thing, getting rid of the problem. Excising the cancer before it spreads.

The image of Nyx, kneeling, eyes heavy with desire, still burns behind my eyelids.

He's trash.

I repeat the words, trying to make them stick.

Just trash.

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SEVEN

LEO

NO ONE HAS EVER EXCITED me as much as him. His hateful words still echo in my ears: *a reminder of who's in charge*. Oh, I *know* who's in charge. And I *love* it. I love how he loses his temper, how he *has* to touch me, how he tries to dominate and only fuels the fire.

My body relaxes against the wall. I replay the scene. His palm against my face, hard, with *hatred*. He almost crushed my cheeks, forcing my head up, pulling me so close to his mouth.

Everything is Dante, everything is that slap.

I lose myself in the closed labyrinth of his thought, of his very being; only *him*. His face consumed by contempt, his jaw clenched, veins bulging in his temples. The smell of cigarettes, the mineral perfume. His animalistic way of gripping.

I close my eyes. I shudder. I imagine him. I imagine his hands holding me by the hair. I imagine him pulling me close, *closer*, until my body loses all weight. I imagine his voice, hoarse, threatening everything he would do to me. I imagine his knee between my legs, his body crushing mine against the concrete, and the grotesque pleasure of being at the mercy of someone who would break every bone in my body.

When I think about what he would do to me if he had freedom for all his instincts, I get lost.

I don't know how much time passes. I stay there, feeling the throbbing burn on my cheek—the chemical ecstasy, a nervous fire. I follow with my

gaze every dusty movement of light across the walls, the distant echo of footsteps in the corridor. The taste of water in my mouth turned metallic, mixed with the slight taste of blood from some open wound in my gums from the slap.

Then, the heavy door groans open again. Not Dante. Footsteps, heavy and familiar. Luca. And another man I don't know. What now? More codes?

Luca says nothing. He approaches and pulls me up by the shoulder—I see his tattoos better now; a dagger with open wings, coordinate numbers, letters on his fingers. VITA MORS. The other man roughly shoves a cloth bag over my head, plunging me back into grainy darkness.

I'm pushed forward. We pass through a few doors, some corridors, and the damp, moldy air gives way to the bitting night. The smell of old concrete and stagnant air fades, replaced by polluted air that smells fresh after the warehouse.

A car door opens. I'm shoved inside, unceremoniously, hitting my head on the ceiling again. The smell of new leather and that faint aroma of cigar smoke—a ghost of Dante's presence; I imagine him smoking like a chimney. Where are they taking me? Another interrogation room? Another warehouse?

The car lurches forward. A silent, bumpy ride full of sharp turns, just like when they brought me here. The car stops abruptly. My door is yanked open, and a strong hand grabs my arm, pulling me out. My worn shoes meet rough asphalt. A pair of hurried, rough hands undo the plastic restraints that still held my wrists tied behind my back, and he scratches my hands carelessly to get them off. Are they letting me go?

Then, the final shove. Hard. He pushes me onto the asphalt, and it scrapes my skin as I fall. With my hands free, I manage to brace myself against what must be a sidewalk, and I stand still, waiting for the next command, the next blow, the next touch.

"He certainly knows he has no place here," Luca's muffled voice comes from somewhere. A car door slams. Another. The distinct sound of an engine starting and fading into the distance.

The engine sound grows fainter and fainter. Until there's nothing but the hum of distant city life.

No, no, no. This isn't right.

With trembling hands, I rip the bag from my head. My vision aches before adjusting again to something that isn't grainy darkness, and the cold

night air is even fresher and more polluted than before. I look at my surroundings. I know this street. I know this sidewalk, this fence, this dead tree, the fluorescent glow of the supermarket sign on the corner.

I'm home.

I look at what's around me. Scattered on the ground are my documents, my wallet, my backpack. What I had with me when they captured me, and they didn't take anything. I open my wallet as fast as I can, and they didn't even touch the money.

They didn't take me to another hell. They threw me back into my *own*, into the insipid, tasteless monotony of my daily existence. They discarded me. Like trash.

They took away my only chance to feel. My only dose of adrenaline. They *cut me off*.

I crush my wallet. This rage I haven't felt in years.

This isn't over. They think they can just throw me away after everything?

Dante. You have no idea who you just poked.

I know your systems. Your algorithms and vulnerabilities.

They're going to regret this.

I'm going to fuck them up.

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CHAPTER III

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EIGHT

DANTE

One week. One week since I got rid of that aberration. One week of a silence that, somehow, is louder than all the fucking noise. My normal life drags on with routine meetings, territorial disputes, and the hunt for a rat still hiding in my shadows. Everything falls back into place, except for the annoying absence of… *that*.

I leave my office, the smell of cigar still clinging to the velvet curtains, and walk down the main corridor. My footsteps echo on the polished marble, a familiar sound that usually brings me a sense of control. Today, it just echoes an emptiness.

As I pass the security room, I hear a nauseating cacophony. A stupid—and irritatingly familiar—electronic beat repeats the same ridiculous phrase on loop. I look inside. Marco, with a scowl, is punching a control panel, and Vinny, the youngest, has his hands on his head, exasperated. Ruslan, as always, cleans his fingernails with a knife, completely oblivious to the chaos.

"What the fuck is that?" I say.

Marco turns, his face flushed with anger and frustration. "This fucking sound system! It's stuck on this shitty song again! I've restarted it ten times, but it always goes back to the same loop." He kicks the panel, which lets out a metallic clang. "Even the surveillance computer isn't working right because of this noise. The south sector cameras are down."

Vinny groans. "I can't stand that duck voice anymore! Give me a sledgehammer, I'll fix this."

Ruslan, without looking up, murmurs, "Technical problems. Maybe the network has some kind of interference. Nothing a good reboot won't solve in a few hours." He shrugs. "Or a bullet through the speaker."

My jaw clenches. Interruptions. That's all I've had lately. "I don't care what the fuck it is. Talk to IT and get back to work. That shipment from the Newark port isn't going to clear itself."

Marco and Vinny nod, going back to messing with wires, while Ruslan gives a sideways smirk, putting away his knife. "Consider it done, boss. We're on it. IT will fix it."

I say nothing. They know it better be fixed soon—we already have enough problems with this infiltrating rat.

I turn to continue on my way. The sound of the stupid beat follows me to the car, pounding in my ears. A mere inconvenience. An irritating glitch. Nothing major. At least that's what I try to tell myself.

I head out to the underground parking garage. This beat has already haunted my nightmares. For the past week, my men's sound system has been particularly insistent on refusing to stop playing it, and for days now, that duck song has refused to leave my head. I reach my armored Cadillac Escalade and get in, trying to put any other melody in place of that one. The sound of the engine is one of the few things that still brings me some comfort.

The drive to the penthouse where Dmitry and Svetlana are waiting is short, but every red light feels like an eternity. I have important matters to resolve with my siblings. Matters that, suddenly, are becoming more complicated.

I arrive at the building, go up the private elevator, and, seconds later, the door opens directly into the living room. Dmitry is already seated at the polished ebony table, his suit impeccable and his analytical gaze fixed on his tablet. He barely landed from Rome yesterday, after weeks of closing deals in Eastern Europe. Svetlana, more relaxed in a silk blazer, stands by the window, observing the Philadelphia skyline with her arms crossed.

"Finally, the crown prince deigns to appear," Dmitry says. He looks up from the tablet, and that clever glint he's always had is there. "I thought I'd have to send Luca to pick you up again."

I roll my eyes. "And I thought you'd pretend for longer that your business in Europe was more important than the mess you left here, Dima."

Svetlana turns from the window, her ice-green eyes fixed on us. "Stop it, both of you. I just got back from a hell of a flight, and the last thing I need is to hear you two bickering." She pulls the nearest chair back and sits down, sliding her tablet onto the glass top. "We have problems."

Dmitry adjusts his shirt collar. "Sveta's right, Dante. Problems. And not the usual ones." He pushes the tablet towards me, the screen displaying a series of free-falling graphs. "Our maritime shipments. Over the past five days, we've had inexplicable delays in Rotterdam and Hamburg. Documentation lost in the customs system, misaddressed containers, and now, the New York port tracking system has started showing random glitches. It seems someone is playing with our numbers."

Svetlana continues for him, "And that's not all. The latest report from the Atlantic City casino shows a discrepancy in payouts from some slot machines. The number of errors in transferring funds to gamblers' accounts is growing. Nothing big enough to cause panic, but enough to raise red flags for anyone who knows where to look. Almost like… warnings."

I frown. These aren't mere inconveniences. This is targeted. "What did IT say?"

Dmitry shrugs, and the smirk vanishes. "They say it's a series of bugs on the servers, maybe a new virus. But the intensity and frequency suggest something more. No one can identify the origin. It's like a ghost in the machine."

A ghost in the machine. Familiar phrase. "About that," Dmitry continues. "We do have a little virtual rat."

"Is it because of him?" Svetlana asks. "The one you're hunting internally."

"It would make sense," Dmitry says. "Such a… *refined* attack... with small interruptions, almost a game of patience. It doesn't look like traditional competition. They're more about breaking legs, not messing with Excel spreadsheets."

But no. It doesn't feel right to me. "The rat is responsible for our information breach to the Malakovs. A breach that until now went unnoticed. I don't see where the Malakovs would gain from this."

"Weakening your competitors is an advantage in itself," Svetlana says. "If the rat knows you've discovered him, it would make sense to make his

attacks more aggressive. Only it would be foolish. Having a rat is only known by a very select group of people."

"And our security assets?" I ask. My voice comes out more controlled than my mind. "The new defenses we implemented after that incident with the Malakovs?"

Dmitry shakes his head. "Intact. That's what puzzles me. There are no signs of a major breach, of a direct attack. It's as if... someone is poking us with a toothpick just to annoy us."

My jaw clenches. Poking. *Annoy*.

This isn't a mere bug. This is personal. And that fucking idiotic music is still playing in my head.

I stare at the tablet screen, the free-falling graphs blurring red in my vision. That damned sound from the security room, the duck voice repeating the same meaningless phrase.

One week. One week without that aberration, and now everything seems… wrong. Too full of a noise that shouldn't be there.

Fuck. If it was him... It would be the worst humiliation of all. He drove me insane, made my body react in ways I didn't understand, and now he was hunting me with *pranks*? That aberration, that *trash*, daring to provoke me even from a distance.

"Are you alright?" Dmitry says. That softened voice, coming from him, is very rare. I must be showing everything. I don't take my eyes off the tablet.

"Just tired," I say. "I can't stand that fucking music anymore."

Svetlana doesn't understand anything. She says, "What music?" and Dmitry suddenly slams his fist on the polished ebony. He says, with sorrowful animation, "You too?!"

My head spins. "What do you mean, 'you too'?"

"By God, Dante. I thought it was just me going crazy. It started about three days ago. In the office, in the car... Even on my headphones, in the middle of an important meeting. The same hellish melody, the same phrase. I almost fired the entire team for incompetence, thinking it was some inside joke of theirs."

Svetlana looks at us genuinely confused. "What are you talking about? I haven't heard any music. I'm talking about the *real* problems. The casino numbers, the port delays... That's what matters."

I swallow hard. The coincidence is absurd. One week since I discarded Nyx, and now, this sonic plague spreads, infesting my life *and* Dmitry's. Svetlana is immune, of course. She doesn't have a sound system.

"It's not possible," I murmur, more to myself than to them. "It's just... coincidence."

Dmitry stares at me. "Since when do things simply happen in our world, Dante?"

His question hits home. *Nyx*. That perverse smirk, the way he seemed to want the pain, how he reveled in humiliation. He was chaos that delighted in messing up order. And what was this stupid music but an orchestrated mess?

"It's just a song," Svetlana says, already impatient. "Can we get back to the real problems? The delays at the Newark port have already cost more than any idiotic music. We have to find the source."

I close my eyes for a second, trying to push away the image of Nyx's face and the irritating melody. Svetlana is right. There are bigger problems. But the annoyance… the damned annoyance remains.

"All right," I say, opening my eyes and forcing my attention back to the tablet. "Let's focus on the real problems. Prepare a briefing for tomorrow, I need all the information you can gather about the origin of these bugs."

The meeting drags on for another hour, a bureaucratic torture punctuated by free-falling data and speculations about the source of the problems. On every new tablet screen, in every loss report, the duck voice and the irritating beat.

No, it can't be him. Not him. It's just fatigue. It's just stress.

THE ELEVATOR DESCENDS, AND FINALLY THERE IS SILENCE. IN THE PARKING garage, I get into the Escalade and start the engine. I don't turn on the radio. I don't want to listen to anything now.

I barely leave the garage, and my cell phone rings. "*Boss! Thank God you answered! We have a… a strange situation here.*"

My jaw clenched. "What now, Vinny? If it's about that fucking duck song, I swear to God that..."

"*No, boss, it's not the music! It's the security room printer! It won't stop printing!*"

I frown. "Printer? What the fuck about a printer?"

"*It's printing… poems, boss. One after another, about plants.*"

My blood runs cold. *Poems*. My stomach churns with a familiar disgust, and the fucking duck song in my head suddenly seems louder, more irritating. "Destroy that shit, Vinny," I order, and hang up on him.

My phone is still hot in my hand. Vinny doesn't understand the gravity of the situation, but *I* do. *One* accident, a song—I could still entertain the possibility of stress. But *two*? What advantage would the Malakovs gain from sending my printer to print *poems*?

That bastard. That filthy aberration is *toying* with me, sending me fucking *poems*. The audacity… the damned audacity blinds me with rage.

I need his address. I need that bastard. I need to end this shit once and for all.

I run every red light and overtake every car that appears in front of me. The duck song, which I try to ignore, now plays in my head with terrifying clarity. Those free-falling graphs from Dmitry's tablet materialize in my vision.

I snatch another phone from the dashboard—the burner, for sensitive calls. I punch in Sal's private number.

It rings twice. Three times.

"Sal," I bark into the phone, not bothering with pleasantries. "I need the hacker's address. Nyx. NOW."

There's a pause on the other end, a beat too long. Sal, usually so quick, seems to hesitate. "*Boss? You mean... t-the one from the interrogation? Luca said he was... disposed of.*"

"Don't give me that bullshit, Sal," I snarl, my knuckles turning white on the steering wheel. The Escalade swerves as I take a corner too fast. "I want his address. Every single one you have. Now!"

Sal clears his throat. "*U-Understood, Boss. Give me a minute. We had his last known residence, but his digital footprint is… tricky. He's good at disappearing, so I…*"

"You have thirty seconds," I cut him off. My patience is a shredded mess. "If you don't give me that address, I will break every fucking bone in your body myself."

"*N-No need, Boss! No need!*" Sal's voice is suddenly urgent, panicked. "*I'm sending it to your secure comms. Along with any other relevant data we have on him. Full file. It's coming through now.*"

I hear the faint ping of the data transfer. I reach for my comms device and hang up, without waiting for his reply, tossing the burner phone onto the passenger seat. My secure comms device flashes with the incoming file. The address. *His* address.

He thinks he can play games with me? He thinks he can turn my life into a fucking circus? I'll show him a game. And he's going to beg to lose.

THE ADDRESS LEADS ME TO A HOUSE SO DEPRESSING AND MUNDANE IT turns my stomach. A complex of gray, single-story houses, indistinguishable from thousands of others in that forgotten corner of the city. No grand estate, no high-tech lair. Just… average. A cage built of mediocrity.

How could a lunatic like him live in such a… *domesticated* place?

I cut the engine. My fingers wrap around the chill metal of my pistol. I don't need backup. This is personal. It's *mine*.

I slam the car door shut. This is so different from the controlled chaos of my world. I remember Luca's words. He works in an office. Almost a civilian.

This place is a betrayal. It makes Nyx even more incongruous, more out of place.

I stride up the short walkway. My gaze sweeps the muted exterior of the house. No lights. No sounds. Too quiet.

I won't knock. I don't knock for pests.

I aim a brutal kick at the door lock. The wood splinters, and the door frame gives way. The door swings inward, revealing a dimly lit, dusty interior.

My pistol is up, aimed, ready. *If I have to, it'll be a single clean shot,* I promise myself.

I step inside, my eyes scanning the small, cluttered living room. Cheap furniture, stacks of old books, wires trailing everywhere like a digital spiderweb. It smells of stale coffee and something chemical.

And then I see him.

Nyx isn't hiding. He's not cowering.

He's sitting on a worn armchair in the center of the room, facing the door. He's wearing everyday clothes; faded sweatpants and an old, stretched-out t-shirt that does nothing to hide the lean lines of his body. His messy black hair falls over his eyes, but I can see a familiar smirk forming as he sees me. The marks of my blows are still on his face.

He's holding a mug, steam curling from its rim. Coffee. He sips slowly, calmly, watching me as if I'm an expected guest.

"Took you long enough, mister," Nyx says, his voice soft, almost a purr. He doesn't move. Doesn't flinch from the pistol pointed directly at his head, nor does he pretend to be surprised.

The audacity. The sheer, infuriating audacity of him. My blood freezes, then boils. This bastard. He knew. He knew I was coming. He wanted me to come.

My finger flirts with the trigger. Every fiber of my being screams to pull it, to blow his brains out and end this farce.

But something stops me. The certainty that he wants me to do it. That he's waiting for it. The thought that even his death would be on *his* terms, a sick reward.

"You think this is funny?" I roar, my voice filling the small room. "You think you can play games with me? Mess with my systems? Send me fucking plant poems? What's your problem, you freak?"

That irritating smirk fades. His face fills with a fury that surprises me. "My problem, mister? You think you can shove me into your fucking life and then throw me back into this bland, goddamn cage?" His voice, low at first, rises with each word, vibrating with a raw emotion that has nothing to do with pleasure, and everything to do with pure, unadulterated rage. "You had no right!"

He's seriously angry about being *freed*? He's not looking at me with lust like he did in captivity; he's *pissed*, as if I owe him something. He's *accusing* me.

This is real. This is his raw, unfiltered rage, and his sheer audacity to yell at *Dante Volkov* about my right to do anything.

Fuck.

My control shatters. The pistol clatters to the floor, forgotten, and I lunge, grabbing his shirt collar with bone-crushing force. I yank him forward, dragging him out of the armchair. The mug clatters to the floor,

shattering into sharp pieces of porcelain, and coffee spreads among the thin layer of dust on the floor. I don't give him time to find his footing. I slam him against the nearest wall, his head thudding dully against the plaster.

"Listen here, you piece of shit," I snarl, inches from his face. "We showed you mercy. What the fuck do you want?"

Nyx doesn't move. He doesn't even struggle to escape my hands. "I want to feel alive. You decided to send me back to hell. You think that's mercy?"

I push him harder against the wall, his smaller body hitting the plaster hard again. "You are an aberration! A pest! You think you can fuck with my territory, come back to it, just because your life is as shitty as you are?"

"You didn't throw me out, you discarded me!" Nyx snaps back, his voice hoarse, but unwavering despite the obvious injury to his entire body against the wall. "And the only reason you did that is because you didn't have the balls to put a fucking bullet in my head!"

That's it. The last straw. The accusation. The ultimate insult. My vision turns red, a hot wave of pure, unbridled fury consuming me. He just pushed all my buttons.

My fist connects with his jaw. A sickening crunch echoes in the silence. Nyx's head snaps to the side, and, this time, he stumbles, his legs almost giving out. He hits the wall again, then slumps, sliding down until he's kneeling on the dusty concrete floor, bracing himself with one hand.

A thin line of blood trickles from the corner of his mouth, staining his pale chin. He coughs, and another crimson drop splatters onto the concrete. He looks at me. I don't know what that look means, and it disturbs me.

My knuckles throb with pain. The sight of his blood, the proof of my violence brings only a hollow, churning emptiness. *He pushed me to this.* He is broken, spitting blood. But those eyes… those fucking eyes. They still hold that twisted pleasure. That damned satisfaction.

"You're nothing but a nuisance. A headache I need to get rid of," I say, trying to convince myself more than him.

Nyx, still kneeling, wipes the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing it across his cheek. The way he looks at me isn't predatory as I remember. Now, it's just... lost.

"Then use me, mister," he rasps, his voice even hoarser and calmer. His eyes, though blazing with defiance, also carry a chilling emptiness. "If I'm useless, if I'm just a problem… then use me to get rid of that anger. Beat

me. Punch me. I don't care. Just make me feel something. Anything. I'm a good punching bag."

My breath hitches. The words, so casually offered, are a grotesque perversion. He is truly broken. He's not just trying to provoke me; he has a genuine willingness to be destroyed. This is madness.

"You're asking me to hit you?" I manage, disbelieving, trying to understand the catch.

Nyx just nods. He gives me a half-smile, empty and eager, with bloodied teeth. "You need to vent, right? You can just... use me. Make me feel."

A raw rage, unlike anything I've ever known, begins to fester in my gut. This isn't the kind of challenge I understand. He fucked up my entire week, every hour of my days, only to culminate in this: an invitation to pure, unadulterated cruelty, offering himself as a tool for my rage.

What the fuck are you?

My boot shoots out. I kick him in the chest, and Nyx grunts, hitting his back against the wall. His breath is ragged now.

The sound that escapes his throat makes my blood run cold. A low moan, which I only hear because we are in complete silence. His eyes, though glazed with pain, fix on mine, reverent, and his pants…

Fuck. I see a bulge forming, *pressing*.

My jaw clenches so hard I think my teeth will crack. An unholy mix of disgust and fascination courses through me. He's *hard* because of this. I shouldn't be so surprised anymore by how inhuman he is—a *nightmare*, a twisted reflection of my own rage.

I stride forward, grabbing a fistful of his messy black hair, pulling his head up until his body rises. His neck stretches, a vulnerable line, and a small, airy gasp escapes his lips.

"You want to feel?" I snarl, allowing myself a venom I detest. My thumb presses hard against his jaw, forcing his mouth open. "I'll make you feel. I'll make you beg to not feel anymore."

His dilated eyes devour my face with a feverish obscenity. That damned bulge in his pants presses harder against the fabric.

My other hand balls into a fist. I punch him in the stomach, below the ribs, and he doubles over, my grip on his hair the only thing holding him upright.

"You like that, you sick fuck?" I snarl, my voice overflowing with contempt. "You like being used? You like feeling pain?" I yank his head up again, forcing him to meet my gaze. That infuriating glint of pleasure. "This is *my* control. Not yours. You feel what *I* want you to feel."

His lips try to form something, but only another low, broken moan escapes. A sound of absolute surrender. The sight of his raw, exposed need, the way his body trembles against my violence, sparked a terrifying impulse within me.

I want to silence that sound. To smother that disgusting pleasure. I want to drown him in my dominance, until he feels nothing but my will.

My hand in his hair tightens further. I stare at his parted, swollen lips, slick with blood and saliva.

Fueled by a mixture of disgust, fury, and an uncontrollable possession, I lower my head.

My mouth crashes onto his.

The kiss is rough, violent. I force my tongue inside, and our teeth clash as I swallow his moans. He grips my shirt so tightly his knuckles turn white.

His touch, his taste, his scent are overwhelming. They set every nerve on fire, and I have no words to describe this sensation. It consumes me, igniting a fury that's both lust and violence. I push him hard against the wall, crushing his body against mine. He arches into my touch, and his covered erection presses against my thigh, throbbing.

I quickly lower my hand to his pants, harshly shoving my hand inside. "Is this what you fantasize about, you disgusting whore? Is this what you dream about?"

His cock is hard, throbbing, a wet, sticky mess.

My fingers wrap around him, and I squeeze hard. I drag my knuckles against his sensitive head, rubbing, and he lets out a strangled gasp, contracting his hips, desperate for a rhythm. I deny it.

"Beg," I order against his mouth, pulling my lips away just enough to speak. My thumb presses into the sensitive underside of his shaft, forcing another moan from his throat. "Beg for it, you pathetic aberration."

His eyes, hazy, try to focus on mine. His mouth opens, gasping for air, pushing his hips against my hand. "Please," he rasps, airy, almost choked, "please, mister… please…"

I watch him, my own breath ragged. *I* control this, not *him*. *I* make the rhythm, and I deny it to him, keeping him on the edge. I squeeze harder, twisting my hand just enough to send another shock through him.

He's panting as a thin sheen of sweat breaks out on his pale skin. The sound of his ragged breaths mingles with the wet, sticky sounds of my hand moving against him.

I move my hand in unpredictable motions. A harsh squeeze, a slow, agonizing drag of my knuckles, a sudden, jarring twist. I want to *torture* him, to push him deeper into the abyss of his own sick desire.

I drag my thumb across the swollen head of his cock, grinding it into the sensitive tip, then pull my hand back just when his body tenses for a climax that never comes. He moans, frustrated by denied ecstasy, arching for something, anything, *more*.

My own body screams, my groin on fire. His moans, his pleas, the sight of his pleasure are tearing at my control. But I *cannot* give him the satisfaction of my surrender.

"Not yet," I snarl, my voice rough with effort. "You don't get to come until I say so. You don't get to feel that relief. Not when you like it this much, you sick fuck."

I drag my nails lightly across his shaft, just enough to torment him, to remind him of his own raw, aching need.

His hips convulse again, and he lets out a frustrated grunt. His head falls back against the wall, on the brink, trembling, his fluids coating my hand and his breathing short and shallow. He's a disaster.

Just as his body tightens for the final, desperate lunge, I rip my hand away.

Nyx sags against the wall. His body remains rigid, trembling, his erection still pulsing.

I step back, disgusted by the wet stickiness on my hand, disgusted by the sight of him, and above all, disgusted by the animalistic satisfaction that still pulses in my veins.

He says nothing, just watches me, with that ragged breathing.

I can't stay here another second. The air is too thick with his scent, with his suppressed moans, with the lingering stench of his perversion. I need to breathe. I need to kill something.

I stalk out of the room, leaving the broken mug, the spilled coffee, and Nyx, trembling and still hard, under a dim, dull, homey light.

I slam the door shut behind me. I need to distance myself from this house, this lunatic, this… feeling.

I open the car door and fall into the driver's seat. My hands still tremble with a mix of fury and something I refuse to name. I grip the steering wheel, and the engine roars, but it brings me no comfort.

The duck song, the damned duck song, is a perverse soundtrack to the images burned behind my eyelids: Nyx's bloodied face, his desperate moans, the nauseating arch of his body, and that pulsating bulge under my hand. My own cock is rock hard, aching. I cannot be as fucked up as him. Not like him. I cannot be like him.

I drive to nowhere. I just stomp on the accelerator at an absurd speed, blurring the city lights into colored streaks. I need to outrun it. Outrun him.

My groin throbs, insistent, demanding a release I denied both of us.

I slam on the brakes only after turning off the main road onto a desolate, dark stretch of abandoned land, with no one around.

I don't want to do this.

My hands fly to my belt. I undo the buckle, unzip my pants. My dick is hard, pulsing with painful urgency. I grab it.

I need to purge him from my system, to force him out of my head.

I close my eyes. The images only intensify. His eyes. The reverence. His pleas, his blood, his moans.

This is what he did. He reduced me to this. To a desperate animal, alone in the dark, trying to fuck away the sickening image of his pleasure.

It's useless. Every thrust, every pump of my hips, is for him. For the way he looks at me. For the way he makes me feel out of control.

My orgasm feels more like a violent expulsion than a climax.

I purge him from myself. But the images remain.

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NINE

LEO

My head throbs, but the pain… the pain is an old friend. The sting in my jaw—a broken tooth—, the burning in my stomach where Dante's punches had landed. All of it is music. The problem is the absence of sound now. His absence.

My erection still pulses. He didn't give me what I wanted. What I begged for. Not the end. Not the climax. He left me here, suspended, vibrating with an unsatisfied need. This refined cruelty… I love and hate it at the same time.

But, as much as I like this punishment, *why* did he run?

I lift my head and take a deep breath. The air in this shitty house is the same as before. The same bland, dead air I've been trying to escape for years.

This I don't like. He could deny me orgasm as many times as he wanted, and I would *beg* again every single time. But I don't like that he left me, not *here*. Again.

I look at my erection, still hard, pulsing, waiting. It's living proof of his violence, of his presence in me.

My hand slides over my own cock, copying his rough movements. The thumb. The knuckles. The squeeze.

I close my eyes, reliving every detail. His scent. The fury in his eyes. The taste of my own blood on his tongue. Every time he denied me, every

time he forced me to beg, I had to work hard to keep from coming. And now, I have to finish what he started.

I moan, low. It doesn't come even close to the sound he pulled out of me.

His touch is addictive. Violent, humiliating.

I bite my lip and let out another moan, louder, deeper. *This is not enough.*

Dante's fingers, his mouth. His body, pressed against mine. His anger, his power. The taste of his lust and hatred.

My cock pulses again. The memory of his body, the feel of him, is too intense.

I clench my fists.

It's not him.

It's not the same.

THE VOLKOVS. THEIR SYSTEMS. THEIR NETWORKS. DANTE'S LIFE. IT'S ALL an open book to me now. He may have thought he erased my digital footprint, but I know how to make ghosts. And I know how to hunt them.

I type shortcodes into the terminal. I don't care about their money. I don't care about their secrets for profit. I care about *Dante*.

I'm already in their peripheral systems. The smaller, neglected ones. The sound systems in their outposts. The internal printers. The tracking systems for their shipments. Now, I'll find their internal communication logs. Their meeting schedules. Dante's personal calendar.

What to do.

I need something that makes Dante crawl back to me. To *me*, specifically, and not anybody else—not another hacker, not a woman, not a man, not another lover.

I need to find a critical breach.

I spend hours diving deeper into their network, mapping their weaknesses, cataloging their vulnerabilities. Not just the ones I found in their printed code, but the ones I'm finding now, the subtle backdoors and faulty protocols they missed.

I'd pinpoint a vulnerability in their Atlantic City casino payout system—something that would start costing them *real* money—but I'm unsure if that's sufficient. My interruptions with their shipments most likely already did something to their bank accounts, but that feels little. *Too* little.

My phone rings. It's weird because no one ever calls me.

I take it, hidden in a drawer under the laptop's table, and check the name.

It's Chad.

I glance at the time. My sick leave is still active.

I ignore it. It rings again. And again.

With a sigh that's more annoyance than exhaustion, I finally answer.

"Yeah, Chad? You know I'm dying of a rare tropical disease, right?" I don't care to pretend my sick leave is real. Chad can't reason for shit about anything that doesn't involve his own name and five compliments anyway.

"*Leo, my champ!*" Chad's voice punches through the speaker, far too cheerful and loud for a man dealing with anything. "*So glad you picked up! Look, I know you're... indisposed, but we've got a bit of a pickle here.*"

A "pickle." Chad's pickles usually involve him forgetting a semicolon or leaving a fucking bracket open. "What is it, Chad?"

"*The internal server, buddy. It's... well, it's not playing nice. We've got some data corruption, and the system's just kinda... frozen. Nicole's been trying everything, but you know how she gets.*" He chuckles, a guilty and annoying sound. "*She thinks it's my fault!*"

It probably is.

"Did you check if the server's plugged, Chad?," I mutter flatly.

"*That's what I thought too! But I checked! Even got Nicole to check! And... it's plugged in! That's why it's a pickle!*" His voice is bubbling with his own misplaced sense of accomplishment for checking a plug. "*And we need it for the Q3 financial reports. Total standstill, champ. No one else can figure it out.*"

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. Chad is useless. I wonder all the time how he even managed to rise to the manager role. I wonder, in fact, how *all* of my coworkers got the job to begin with.

"Fine. What do you want me to do?"

"*Can you... swing by the office? Just for a bit? You're the only one who understands the... the server codes.*" He recognizes it too. No one knows

shit about what they're doing. "*I'll make it worth your while. Pizza? My treat!*"

Pizza. As if cheap, greasy pizza would compensate for having to breathe the same air as Chad. The idea of going back to that gray cubicle was bland, tasteless. A pathetic excuse of a manager was dragging back the monotony of my daily existence that I had just escaped.

"Fine, Chad," I say. "I'll be there."

"*My champ! Knew I could count on you! Hurry up, okay?*"

He hangs up before I retort.

I toss the phone onto the desk. The sheer idiocy of my day job. To fix a stupid server.

Chad's code is a monstrosity. He probably tried to implement some "innovative" new feature he saw on a LinkedIn post, then forgot to close a loop or declared a variable inside a conditional statement instead of globally. Or, worse, he plugged an old USB drive from his personal collection into the main server and infected it with some ancient, forgotten virus from the early 2000s. That would be just like him, to use the company server for his personal shirtless photos.

I stand up, grabbing a hoodie from the back of my chair. My body still aches.

The walk to the subway is a blur of gray concrete and droning city noise. I hate it. I hate the mundane faces, the predictable movements, the suffocating normalcy. I notice strangers looking at me curiously, even worriedly, and I only understand when I see my reflection in the grimy windows: the dark circles under my eyes, and the bruises. A blossoming mark on my jaw, another faint one on my cheekbone, a crooked black and blue nose, and a fresh cut on my lower lip. Dante.

I reach the office building, a nondescript glass and steel tower. Inside, the lobby is a hive of identical drones in business casual. I head for the turnstiles, the kind with facial recognition cameras that scan your face and beep you through.

I place my face in front of the scanner. It whirrs.

ACCESS DENIED

What the fuck? My ID badge is still valid. I try again.

ACCESS DENIED

My patience, already thin, begins to fray. I glare at the camera. Is it the angle? The lighting? Or…

The fucking bruises. *Of course*. My face isn't registering correctly. The system probably flagged me as an unrecognized or, worse, a damaged employee.

With a growl of irritation, I turn towards the reception desk. Brenda, a woman whose smile was as fake as her blonde highlights, looks up.

"Good morning, sir! Can I help you?" Her voice is saccharine sweet.

"My badge isn't working," I mumble, trying to keep my head low, hoping she wouldn't notice.

Too late. Her eyes, magnified by thick glasses, zero in on my face. Her fake smile falters, replaced by a wide-eyed stare.

"Oh my goodness!" she gasps, losing her sweetness. "Mr. Leo! What on earth happened to your face?!"

I clench my jaw, the pressure sending a fresh throb through the bruise. "Just... a minor accident." I force a neutral tone, trying not to snap. It is none of her business. It is none of anyone's business.

Brenda leans forward, her voice dropping to a theatrical whisper, as if she were privy to some juicy gossip. "A fall? Or... did someone...?"

"It's fine, Brenda. Can you just manually let me through?"

She types something into her computer. The turnstile whirs again with a soft click. "There you go, Mr. Leo. Do be careful!"

I stride through the gates, ignoring her last remark, and head straight for the elevators. I press the button for the IT floor. My cage.

The elevator ride is slow, the canned music doing nothing to soothe my frayed nerves. I step out onto the IT floor, a brightly lit expanse of cubicles. The air hums with the drone of computers and the quiet murmur of suppressed despair.

Nicole is perched on the edge of her cubicle, her usual messy bun threatening to unravel with a forgotten coffee cup in her hand. Her eyes light up as she spots me, in a genuine, unadulterated warmth that always seems out of place in this cynical office.

"Leo! Oh, thank goodness you're here! Chad's been pulling his hair out —" She breaks off mid-sentence, her bright smile faltering as her gaze lands on my face. "Oh, my god, Leo! What happened to your face?!"

Just then, Chad pops his head out of his office with his comb-over askew. He beams when he sees me. "Leo, my champ! You made it! I knew I could count on you, you magnificent genius! Now, about this server—"

He looks at my face, and his already red skin somehow goes a shade redder. His smile vanishes. "Good heavens, Leo! What in the blazes happened to your face?!"

Just what I need. Two rounds of superficial concern before I even get to fix the same damn server for the hundredth time.

I stalk past Nicole and Chad, heading straight for the server room. The small, windowless space smells of stale air and warm electronics. The server rack, a blinking monument to Chad's ineptitude, hums ominously.

"What did Chad do to you?" I mutter to it.

It's probably a self-inflicted DDoS, a digital auto-asphyxiation.

I connect my diagnostic tools. In the server logs, a familiar pattern, but not a virus or a simple bug. Chad must've tried to implement a new data encryption module he'd bought off a shady forum, probably thinking it would make him look smart. Instead, it is clashing with the old, decrepit operating system. Amateur. Pathetic.

As I untangle Chad's spaghetti code, my thoughts drift back to the Volkovs. To Dante. The constant throbbing of my jaw, the ghost of his hand on my skin.

The tiny annoyances I'd inflicted on the Volkovs were just pranks. They proved I could get in, but they didn't make Dante crawl back to me. They just made him angry. And while his anger is delicious, it isn't enough, because he left me again. It isn't him needing me.

I dissect the encryption module Chad installed. This module is designed to protect data, but could also corrupt it if badly implemented. Or, even worse, it could be used to leak data in a controlled way.

I picture Dante's face in the wall, his sneer, his rage.

He wouldn't crawl back for a few missing packages or some phantom bad music. He needs a threat. A threat that only I can solve. A threat that his brute force can't fix.

Just then, I hear footsteps behind me. Chad and Nicole. Of course. They couldn't resist.

"So," Chad's voice, far too loud for the small room, pierces my concentration. "How's my champ doing? Almost there, huh? I knew you'd figure it out."

"He's amazing, isn't he?" Nicole whispers, as if I weren't listening. I feel her standing too close, peering over my shoulder. "It's like he just... sees the code. This is way worse than when Trent broke the old server last year with that ransomware, you know? That was an external attack. This is internal."

Nicole always thinks it's an attack or a virus. But it's always Chad.

"This isn't a..." I start, but I don't complete it.

Internal.

"What did you say?" I say.

"Huh? Oh," Nicole stammers. "Just that it's amazing. And that Trent's ransomware attack last year was external, but this is... internal. It seems bad."

Malakovs.

My mind, which had been searching for a solution, a lever against Dante, clicks. The pieces fall into place. *Internal*. Ransomware. Malakovs.

The *perfect* threat.

This is it. I'll use the Malakov's network. They have historic problems with the Volkovs; they have a *rat* infiltrated among them, if Dante didn't already shoot everyone he deemed a suspect. I'll corner Dante. I'll *force* him to make a choice.

And that choice will be me.

AFTER CHAD MAKES A RIDICULOUS SHOW OF "REBOOTING" THE NOW-FIXED server and "thanking" me with a limp handshake and the promise of a stale pizza party, I pack up my laptop and Nicole approaches my cubicle with a hesitant smile. Her messy bun is, as usual, on the verge of collapsing.

"Hey, Leo," she says. "Um, I know you've been, you know, indisposed, but I was wondering... there's this new ramen place that opened downtown. I heard it's really good. Would you, uh, want to check it out sometime? As a thank you for coming in today."

I pause, hovering my hand over my laptop bag. Ramen. Tonight. My mind instantly conjures the image of Dante's face. The thought of spending an evening making small talk with Nicole, dissecting noodles, feels like a punishment, and not the good kind.

And I don't see a single utility she'd have for me. Why would she even want my company to eat ramen, anyway?

"Thanks, Nicole," I say, already picturing myself back home, lost in the Volkov's network. "But I can't tonight. Got a lot of... catching up to do. With my tropical disease. Maybe another time."

Her smile falters slightly. "Oh. Right. No worries. Just thought I'd ask." She fiddles with a pen, avoiding my gaze. "Well, get well soon. And, um, try not to get into any more 'accidents'." She gestures vaguely at my still-bruised face.

I give her a noncommittal nod and finish packing. As I walk out, I feel her eyes on my back. A flicker of annoyance, quickly dismissed. Nicole is harmless. My thoughts are back to Dante.

Back in my shitty house, the dull ache in my jaw is a comforting reminder of what I had to do. I power up my laptop and dive back into the Volkov network. The Malakov's systems, so impenetrable to mere mortals, begin to yield their secrets to me. I map their vulnerabilities, find their hidden channels, and, most importantly, find the evidence of their latest dealings with the Volkov traitor.

I can get full access to the rat's previous infiltration points. The access they used to bleed the Volkovs dry of information for the Malakovs—their original goal was to weaken the Volkovs, but I could amplify that. Turn a slow bleed into a hemorrhage.

I find a backdoor into their central logistics hub—the one controlling their shipments in and out of the East Coast. Instead of just "lost documentation," I engineer small, seemingly random diversions of high-value cargo. A percentage of their illicit goods, just enough to be a significant loss, will be redirected to ghost ports or untraceable dead drops. The Malakovs wouldn't even know it was happening; the goods would just *disappear* from Volkov tracking.

This'll all look like the Malakovs are simply *escalating* their existing infiltration, getting bolder, getting *smarter*. Dante will assume it is their work, amplified by his rat, *if* the rat's still alive. He won't suspect a third party. Not at first.

But I'll leave my signature. A series of nested data anomalies embedded within the corrupted packets. Nothing obvious. Nothing that would scream "hacker". But something that, if analyzed by a mind as obsessive as Dante's (or as skilled as Sal's, under extreme duress), would eventually point to *my*

previous work. A specific sequence of unused bytes. A peculiar timestamp pattern. A digital ghost print. My way of saying: *It's me, mister. And only I can stop it.*

And then, he would come to me.

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TEN

DANTE

I GOT RID OF HIM. I extirpated him from myself. The printers no longer spit out poems, and that damn music finally vanished from the security room speakers, from my car, from my head. I won. I purged the aberration back to his pathetic civilian life, and he, like the plague he is, fled back to the sewer he crawled out of.

But it doesn't feel like a victory.

My best whiskey tastes bitter. The cigar no longer has any anxiolytic effect, nothing to comfort me with its familiarity, and my office, where I once found peace, is just an office now. I don't understand. I don't understand how he can ruin mundane things he didn't even touch. What the fuck does that fucking Nyx have to do with my cigar, my office, my drinks? Why, after him, does everything wither? Like a fucking cancer.

Dmitry had been in the conference room, reviewing charts for hours. He scrolled through his tablet while Svetlana thumbed through a stack of reports, shaking her head. "They have nothing," she said. "We have guards watching every IT member, every network engineer, every programmer. Day and night. And not a single suspicious movement..."

And that's it.

As if Nyx wasn't enough of a problem, the Malakovs' moves were getting worse. The data breach opened by that rat wasn't as small as we initially thought. Our shipments were now being completely rerouted, disappearing from our logistics systems without a trace. Not just delays, but

outright theft. High-value cargo vanished, and the discrepancies in betting transfers were now too large to ignore. We're talking millions in losses, not just a few thousands here and there.

"Is there a chance this isn't internal?" Dmitry asked, trying to find a clearer solution for the plummeting graphs on the screen.

"It *has* to be internal," Svetlana interrupted, her voice hoarse. "The nature of the attacks—the precision, the knowledge of our specific vulnerabilities, the way they manipulate existing systems instead of breaking new ones—it's too sophisticated for an external brute-force attack. It's someone who knows our networks."

"Well, my men confirmed the empty function in the backup script was exploited," Dmitry said, rubbing his temples. "And that it points to a wider, preexisting backdoor. It was just dormant. Now it's wide open, and someone is walking through it like they own the damn place. But if it's internal and our guards haven't seen anything suspicious from our personnel, then who the hell is doing this?"

Svetlana sighed, running a hand through her hair. "This is definitely a Malakov investment. We've exhausted every lead. If there was a rat at some point, they already knew our defenses."

"We need someone who thinks differently," Dmitry said. "Someone who doesn't follow the rules, who can find the ghost haunting us." He paused, and the air in the room grew denser. "We need a hacker, Dante. Someone... like that Nyx from New York. If it's him working for the Malakovs... we already know how that ended last time."

My blood ran cold. That damned name.

Last time Nyx worked for the Malakovs, we suffered irreparable losses. But I know he told the truth in that warehouse. It wasn't him working for the Malakovs.

But there *was* that possibility, which I *detested*, that he was still meddling with our business.

"No," I said. "No way in hell. That aberration is out of the question."

Dmitry raised an eyebrow. He knew about the kidnapping, knew about Nyx's help and shared information, but I'd spared him the disturbing details. He didn't understand. "He found that vulnerability for you, didn't he?" he said. "Faster than Sal's entire team. He proved his... capabilities, and said he works for whoever pays."

"His 'capabilities' are a distraction," I snarled, and the memory of his ironic smile, his moans, his unbearable pleasure burned behind my eyelids. "He's a perversion, not an asset. He almost drove me insane."

"Dante, our family is bleeding. We need a solution, and if this said *aberration* is the only one who can find it, then we use him," Svetlana said. "Let's say he *is* working for the Malakovs. If he works for whoever pays, we can double their contract with a bigger offer."

"I'll bring in some other candidates this week," Dmitry said, picking up his phone. "Top-tier hackers, the best we have, but we know none of them have a reputation like his. If they fail, Dante, we'll need to reconsider Nyx. He's the only one who's shown any real understanding of their methods."

I stared at them, my siblings, my family, trapped in this spiraling disaster. They don't understand. They can't. They haven't seen the depths of his madness, haven't *felt* the disturbing way he distorts everything.

THE NEXT FEW DAYS WERE A BLUR OF STERILE, FRUSTRATING MEETINGS. THE so-called best hackers had impressive digital espionage and counterintelligence backgrounds, but all of them, for some reason, seemed too cautious.

The first, a woman in her early thirties, spent hours analyzing data and grumbling about firewalls and intrusion detection systems. She found nothing new. "It's a ghost" was the only thing she said, as if we didn't already know, after opening some log file.

The second was a frantic young man who talked a mile a minute and dramatically waved his hands while explaining complex algorithms. He set up new honeypots, new traps, but the attacks continued, bypassing his new defenses with irritating ease. He left, looking defeated, babbling about advanced AI and quantum encryption.

The third, an older, cynical man with a perpetually tired face, just shook his head as he analyzed the data. He opened the same file that made the first hacker leave, and said, after a day of fruitless searching, "Look, we can try to trace who did this, but dealing with him digitally... I'd rather not get involved."

Before he left, I stopped him. "What the hell's the problem?" I said.

He peered at the terminal screen before answering me. "It appears to be a hacker known as Nyx, Mr. Volklov. He usually leaves signatures in the logs, but he's good. Nobody wants that kind of headache here."

The duck's song, the printed poems, the absurd little pranks. It was just the warm-up.

Of course, it's him.

That sick son of a bitch. He's forcing my hand.

I snatch my secure comms device from the table. My fingers, usually steady as stone, tremble slightly as I dial Luca's private number. It rings once, twice, before his gravelly voice answers.

"*Boss?*"

"Get him," I order, the words tasting bitter in my mouth. "Bring him here. I don't care how, but not a single scratch. And make sure he understands this isn't an option. He's *our* asset now."

Nyx, you sick bastard. You win. *For now.*

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CHAPTER IV

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ELEVEN

LEO

FOR A WHILE, I even forgot about my fern.

I discovered, grudgingly, that Nicole watered it while I was "sick". Maybe Dante really awakened something in me, because a strange warmth spread through my ribcage when she told me. My fern. It was green, as much as I remembered, absorbing all of Nicole's affection.

Of course, taking care of a fern is still good. It doesn't make me want to die as much as everything else. But between it and Dante…

I've been monitoring the Volkovs' reaction to the new attacks. There were futile attempts to push me back with honeypots. It's cute they implemented that. I saw the trap from a mile away. Afterward, they strengthened some vulnerable points, some easy entries. But I'm already inside.

Monitoring is fun, at least, while I return to the monotony of the office.

I fill out an Excel document in ten minutes—the same one Chad couldn't do—, check logs, observe the static, inert life of my fern. Super interesting. Nicole tries to bring up some idiotic subject, and the most I can do for her is force a smile.

The wounds on my face improve every day. I still have a lump on my jaw from a broken and sore molar, but it's no longer as visible, and what doesn't cause unnecessary questions from my coworkers doesn't bother me as much (though it hurts like hell). I have some fascination looking at it in the mirror. A piece is missing, and the enamel is cracked. I remember

Dante, inadvertently, every time I chew out of habit with that molar. The pain is excruciating. Like him.

At six in the afternoon, I get up from the hard swivel chair and put my few belongings in my backpack. Nicole and Chad call me to eat pizza. I decline. I'll keep declining until they give up.

My walk back home, after the subway, is on empty, quiet streets. A residential area, with few cars and houses that are clones of each other. It's cheaper because it has a history of crime in the vicinity. I don't mind walking alone. I'd even be grateful if I were robbed. *Thanks for the adrenaline.*

I cross the street. It's the crosswalk, but I don't look both ways. I walk in a straight line, not caring about peripheral lights, until a car slowly stops in front of me. *Is this asshole giving me high beams?*

I squint, trying to distinguish something in that explosion of light, and I see: a black SUV, with dark, certainly armored windows. Like that time. Like when Dante took me.

I lower my backpack, resting it on the sidewalk, and the front door opens. I recognize him immediately: Luca, impassive, casting his immense shadow over the asphalt. His expensive suit and obviously troglodytic body make it clear he's not a civilian.

"Déjà vu," I say. He doesn't approach, and no other men get out of the car. There are no signs of violence. "Where's the bag this time?"

He ignores my question. "The boss wants to speak with you, sir."

Sir.

"I'm half your age," I say.

Luca walks unhurriedly to the back door. He opens it, stands beside it, and gestures, palm facing me and fingers pointed toward the car.

"Please," he says. It's no plea. It's an order. I imagine he'd drag me by force if I said no.

I approach as slowly as he did, pulling my backpack back onto my shoulders, hanging it on one shoulder strap. I stop in front of him. I look into his eyes, whose color I never knew. They are brown. Not as dark as Dante's, not as light as Nicole's.

I can glimpse the holster beneath his blazer. Armed.

"I was expecting more violence," I say.

He shows nothing but attention and something close to hesitation. He knows I'd like the violence. He must think I'm an unpredictable lunatic.

"Mr. Volkov's orders were to bring you untouched," he says. He reinforces his gesture of pointing into the car and repeats, more impatiently, "If you please."

Untouched. So he can be the only one to hurt me?

I give him a smirk before getting into the car. Luca lets out a discreet sigh of relief. He closes the door for me, like a gentleman, and I barely recognize the same man who pulled my hair and pushed me through the warehouse corridors.

Of course, he's not alone. The other big guy in the driver's seat says nothing, doesn't even look at me. He accelerates after Luca gets in, and this time there's no blindfold preventing me from recognizing the way.

I don't know if I like this.

I map the route. It's long. We're not heading in a rural or commercial direction. Instead, we're going toward a distant neighborhood known for its security and ostentation—a gated community.

I stay silent the entire time. As the gates open and the car drives into the community—a cluster of mansions and luxury buggies—I peek through the windows. *Buggies*. For what, playing *golf*? The lawns of all the mansions are impeccable, maintained by some poorly paid day laborer, and we pass to the furthest, largest mansion. It's surrounded by well-pruned, dense bushes, and the front garden has a fucking fountain with a stone bird statue.

The car parks in front of the mansion.

What the fuck is this?

Luca gets out of the car, and, again, like a gentleman from a thousand years ago, opens the door for me. I step out.

"I have hands," I complain.

He also closes the door for me.

"I said I have hands," I say, louder, and he just gestures for me to follow him.

A golden pebble path. A lady trimming the leaves of a boxwood. A butterfly on the edge of the fountain. It would be domestic if it weren't for the guards scattered throughout the perimeter.

Luca opens the mansion door. Inside, of course, there are more guards—and, otherwise, it's a holiday resort. White marble, tall columns, ebony furniture, and velvet sofas. I grip my backpack strap as tight as I can. I don't understand.

Why am I here?

Luca leads me to a back room. It's less ostentatious than the rest of the house, with few—and small—grated windows, visible cameras, and robust locks. It has a simple bed against the wall, minimalist furniture like any ordinary bedroom. The bed is made, and the floor is clean.

I hesitate to enter. I don't know what's happening. Luca goes in first, looking up over his shoulder.

"What the fuck is this," I murmur.

"Your home," a voice says from behind me.

I recognize it. From my dreams, from my best memories. Dante. His shadow swallows me, and I see it emerge on the floor.

I turn to him.

He's not seething with rage. He looks disgusted, perhaps, tired. And there are no handcuffs. No bags over my head. Just an immaculate guest room in a ridiculously opulent mansion, with a tidy bed and no signs of blood or torture, with a fucking porcelain flower on the nightstand. A fucking home.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I say, incredulous. It wasn't supposed to be like this. It wasn't supposed to be comfortable.

Dante approaches, and Luca closes the door behind us. A click. Is he *really* imprisoning me *here*?

"It's simple," Dante says, and he gives me a look that promises things won't be simple. "You will be contained. Your ‘games' are over. Your ‘attacks' will cease. You will stay here until you fix the fucking mess you created, and any others that appear. And most importantly: you will *not* give me any more headaches, understood?"

"I… what?" I almost gape, with a half-failed, incredulous smile. He's not imprisoning me in a dungeon. He's *domesticating* me. Giving me a *routine*. Stuffing me into a velvet cage. This is worse than *anything* I could have imagined.

"You're not here on vacation," Dante continues. "You're here because I need you where I can see you, where I can ensure you won't fuck up my life anymore. You won't have external internet access, except under supervision. Your movements will be monitored, and your communication controlled. And, unlike what you seem to enjoy, I have no patience for your perversions. You will not feel a fucking thing of what you want to feel here."

I clench my fists. My backpack slips from my shoulder and falls to the floor. The broken molar throbs. What changed? It's a physical reminder of the violence Dante gave me, but that he's denying me now. *Even that.* What the *hell* changed?

"You're… you're giving me a fucking room?" I can't control my voice. It comes out louder than intended, angrier. "You're locking me up in a fancy condo? After *everything* I did, you give me a *home*?"

Dante looks at me, and he almost seems satisfied. Of course. Giving me more of the same, more of my daily misery… is this how he wants to punish me in a way I won't like?

"Show me what's in your head." He points to a desk with a computer already on. "Let's work. And don't make me lose my patience."

I look at the room, at the made bed, at the computer.

The emptiness of a predetermined routine, of an imposed normal life.

This isn't what I wanted. This is worse than Chad's office.

I pick up the porcelain flower sculpture and hurl it at the wall. It shatters into several porcelain pieces, scattered on the floor with a sharp crack that makes Luca rest a hand on his holster. Dante stares at me with a frown, but I avert my gaze.

I worked as hard as I could for this. For *this*. To prefer my personal hell. To prefer going back to a fucking fern in a gray cubicle.

My jaw aches. My head spins.

I walk to the computer. I sit in the chair.

Nyx isn't truly here. It's just Leo. Tired of this milking shit.

The computer hums, innocent and gleaming. I look at it with sympathy. *I wish I were like you, friend. Inanimate and empty-headed.*

Dante stands close to me, in silence. He wants to watch. He wants to see me squirm, probably. Well, I'll squirm, but not in the way he expects. This isn't a show. This is just… work.

"What do you want?" I ask, my voice flat, devoid of any of the taunting tones I usually use with him. "The Malakovs' ghost? The missing shipments? The casino payout glitches?"

Dante's shadow looms. "All of it. And any other vulnerabilities you find. I want them closed. Permanently. You created this mess; you'll clean it up."

"I didn't create anything," I retort, starting to type. "I just exposed what was already there. Your systems are Swiss cheese." I don't look at him. I

scan the directories, quickly navigating through the Volkovs' network. It's the same old thing. Predictable.

I access the main server logs. The network traffic is a chaotic mess, a hurricane of data packets. I ignore the noise and sift through the layers of encryption and firewalls that are utterly useless against my intrusions.

"The Malakovs aren't subtle. These recent attacks are too refined for them," Dante says, in a low voice. "My IT team hasn't found anything inside."

"Because it is subtle," I reply, tracing a hidden path through their compromised logistics hub. "It's embedded in your existing infrastructure. I don't need to break in when I already have the key."

I pull up the code for their East Coast shipping manifests. There it is. An elaborate script, disguised as a routine inventory check, systematically diverting high-value cargo to undetectable ghost addresses. It's elegant. It's my work, of course. I see the nested anomalies I incorporated.

Dante's gaze is heavy. He's waiting for a reaction. For a moan, a shiver, a desperate plea. He's waiting for Nyx. But how am I supposed to moan while fixing my thousandth broken system?

"It's a phased attack, diverting a percentage, not everything. Keeps it off the radar." I observe his reflection on the dark screen, his jaw clenched.

"And the casino?"

I navigate to the casino's financial records. The payout discrepancies. A hidden script that manipulates the random number generator for certain slot machines, increasing payouts. The transfer errors are a simple redirect to inactive accounts, disguised as failed transactions. More ghost work. More of my art.

"Subtle," I repeat.

I feel his presence behind me, closer now. His breath, warm and heavy, hovers over my neck. A flicker of something, a tiny spark of awareness, tries to ignite in my stomach, but I smother it. *No*. Not here. Not for this.

"Then fix it," Dante snarls. "Fix it all. And then find the Malakovs' main operational hub that you benefited."

I shrug, already writing a script to identify the initial injection point, a backdoor left open by the very rat Dante hunted.

"I will," I say. "Just tell me what you want me to do. I'm just the guy who does the job."

It's the worst insult I can offer him. Reducing myself, the *aberration* he was expecting, to a mere tool. He expected Nyx. He got Leo, the IT guy.

He must be relieved.

Dante says nothing. A silent rage. I keep typing, ignoring the phantom ache in my jaw, the ghost of his touch.

I need to find the quickest path to freedom from this gilded cage.

"How long?" I hear Dante suddenly. He's impatient.

I don't stop working. "Depends. Maybe a few days for the immediate threats. A week to truly fortify everything. Depends on how many other neglected backdoors you've got scattered around your network. Depends on how much coffee I'm allowed, and if the chairs in this gilded cage are comfortable enough."

Then, he doesn't speak to me. But his eyes still burn into my back. "Luca," he says. "Get out."

I don't need to look to know Luca obeys without a second thought. I hear the footsteps, the click of the door, and the subtle shift in the air. Alone. Did I piss him off?

His shadow deepens over me, blocking the dim room light. I keep typing. I keep focusing on the code.

"What the hell is your problem?" Dante, now, speaks low. Like a threat. As if he *disliked* that there was no Nyx here.

I stop typing. I turn my head and meet a furious gaze I'm not sure I fully understand. I answer with sincerity. "My problem is that your systems are outdated. And I miss my fern."

I see the muscle in his jaw jump. His eyes narrow, and a fist clenches.

A slap.

The crack echoes. My head snaps to the side, and I hadn't even registered his hand approaching my face. I only understand because a piercing pain runs across my cheek. It stings. It hurts.

I bring my hand to my cheek. It must be red, with the exact outline of his hand. It burns.

He hit me out of nowhere after all his talk about "no perversions"?

"Why did you…," I start, looking at him, confused, and the second slap hits me before I can finish.

This one is harder, sharper. My head whips to the other side, and a metallic taste blooms in my mouth—my cracked molar throbbing with a pain that mirrors across my gum.

Before I can process the shock, his hand clamps around my hair. He pulls my head back, forcing my face up, exposing my throat, making me look directly into his enraged eyes. The rough pull on my scalp is a delightful pain that masks my jaw for a second.

I moan. It's involuntary, just like the heat that begins to spread through my groin, flooding my pants. Everything blurs, everything that isn't his face, his furious gaze, and his hand entangled in my hair.

"That's what I thought," Dante murmurs. His grip tightens. "How long?" he growls. "How long will it take, *Nyx*?"

My vision swims, fixated on his mouth. I drink him in. "As long as you want," I whisper. I can't hide how much this turns me on. "However long you want."

He gives me an almost imperceptible smile. Satisfied. "There you are," he says. The desire is there before he can mask it with more seething rage, and his grip in my hair tightens further.

His thumb drags across my swollen lower lip, exposing my blood-stained teeth. It smears onto his skin. He watches it, fascinated.

"You have twenty-four hours," he snarls. "Twenty-four hours to shut down every single one of their access points, stop the bleeding, and give me a full report. Understood?"

There's nothing I can say but, "Yes, sir…"

He releases my hair with a harsh shove. My body sags on the chair as I grip the armrests, and it's hard to breathe. I watch him turn his back on me, unaltered; watch him leave and lock the door from the outside. I revere him in silence.

Twenty-four hours.

His voice, that look… they're all it takes.

I'll twist everything to his will. Anything. Everything.

In twenty-four hours.

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TWELVE

DANTE

I DON'T THINK I'll ever understand Nyx.

I thought he desired this. My attention. Being confined in this house on my terms sounded like a victory for him, almost a defeated testament to me, but just as he was enraged at being *freed* from a kidnapping, all he showed was *frustration* at being placed here.

I looked for Nyx in what seemed like a tired, clumsy version of him. The same appearance and voice, the same bruises and features. A wrong doppelganger. I looked for Nyx in the way he looked at me. The reverence, the submission. The inherent obscenity of those pupils that dilated when they saw me. And there was only tiredness. Disinterest.

I'm not proud of having pulled him to the surface. Nyx truly only appears at the sign of pain. A slap, a tug of the hair, and he would moan for me again. *My body* would react to him again.

Nyx. I don't understand you.

The twenty-four-hour deadline is absurd. Sal's team took weeks to gather all the leak data, and I only suggested it to see him fail.

Of course, it would be great if everything was resolved in twenty-four hours. Unrealistic and utopian. My siblings called at all times, reporting casualties or seeking updates. With Nyx working with us, Dmitry is more confident. Svetlana, on the other hand, only operates by seeing practical results.

I try to focus on my obligations. Failing to do so leads me to my best whiskey and my best cigars. My body, despite my best efforts, still responds to the violence that had brought Nyx back to life, back to *me*. The memory repeats itself against my will. It's a disgusting cocktail of repulsion and raw, animalistic arousal that I can't purge. I hate it. I hate *him* for making me feel it.

The clock in my office had just struck the twenty-four-hour mark. I don't bother with pleasantries. I don't send Luca. This is *my* problem, *my* aberration.

I walk through the polished marble corridor of the mansion. I half expect to find him slumped over the keyboard, asleep, defeated by the task. Or *worse*, to find him having sabotaged something else, just to piss me off. I don't know what to expect from him, not really, and that's what makes me most nervous.

I reach the door and open it without knocking. The ceiling light is off, and only the computer screen illuminates Nyx's desk. He is there, seated in the desk chair, facing the monitor.

He doesn't turn to me.

"Report," I demand. I need him to react, to give me something beyond that placid, tired stillness.

The swivel chair glides across the floor toward me. It stops gradually until it is facing me. Nyx leans back, tilting the chair's backrest, and looks up at me, upside down. He gives me an almost inconsequential smile, dangling a black USB stick in his hand.

"Here you go, boss," he says, his voice hoarse with fatigue. His dark circles are more prominent, but the pride is obvious.

At least, this one still looks like Nyx.

I take the USB from his fingers. He adjusts himself in the chair, turning to face me. He rests his arms on the top of the backrest and his chin on them, watching me with that smile bordering on amusement.

He's very confident. Either this USB would destroy what remained of all our systems, or he adhered to my impossible deadline.

I say nothing. I turn and leave the room—whatever is on the USB will dictate my true reaction.

I march straight to the main operations room, where Dmitry and Svetlana are already poring over new data.

"Any new developments?" Svetlana asks, without looking up.

I slam the USB stick onto the polished table. "He said he fixed it."

Dmitry looks up, a flicker of disbelief in his eyes, and then takes the USB. He plugs it into his high-security laptop, his fingers flying over the keyboard, accessing the affected systems. Svetlana and I stand behind him, peeking at the screen.

He checks the reports prepared by Nyx. Detailed, in an organization that I find difficult to associate with him. All problems, access points, and vulnerabilities are properly listed and linked. Dmitry opens each of the scripts and modifications, each cluster of characters whose purpose I don't understand.

Dmitry's brow furrows more and more. He grabs his tablet, accessing real-time logs in a hurry, reviewing Nyx's files, and opens our graphs that had only plummeted in the last week.

Today and now, the red indicators are turning green. The casino payout numbers, the shipping manifests... they are stabilizing.

The bleeding stopped. In 24 hours.

That son of a bitch actually did it.

"Holy shit," Dmitry says, leaning back in his chair, almost breathless. "He... he fixed it. All access points were shut down. All backdoors were patched. He even implemented new, stronger encryption protocols where the old ones failed." He looks at me with an admiration that is very rare for him. "Dante, this is incredible. We've been investing millions in this for weeks, and he did it in a day."

Svetlana runs her hand over her mouth, stunned. "Twenty-four hours. And you kept him locked up all this time? Why the hell didn't we use him before?"

Dmitry nods, and a rare, genuine smile breaks through his usual stoicism. "We need him, Dante. Permanently. Not just for this, for everything. We need to make him an offer, we can't let him provide services to the competition again. I'll draft an ironclad contract. We need to keep him working for us."

Dmitry is too excited, talking about contracts, about making an offer, about talking to him. He doesn't understand. He sees a tool. But Nyx is a ticking time bomb, a twisted reflection.

"He's... temperamental," I say. "He doesn't work with contracts, trust me."

Dmitry furrows his eyebrows. He knows my behavior is strange. "Temperamental how? We deal with volatile assets every day. This isn't just about the Malakovs now. It's about securing our future. A mind like that..." He looks at the screen, then back at me, with an admiration I haven't seen in him for a long time. "Do you think he needs to be... *incentivized* differently?"

"He needs to be *controlled*," I retort. I start to feel pressure in my teeth, my jaw too clenched. "He operates outside conventional frameworks. He responds to... clear directives. You're not getting it."

"I want to meet him," Svetlana says. "Properly. A genius who solves our biggest problem in 24 hours needs to be vetted. And I want to understand this 'specific approach' you're talking about."

I know Svetlana's inflexibility. She's determined. No matter what I say.

This makes me uneasy.

Dmitry, for the first time, seems to consider my words. He trusts my judgment on volatile assets, even if he doesn't completely understand my aversion to Nyx. "Alright, Dante. If you say so. But I'll still draft the preliminary contract details. Just for our records. A framework. For when he's... assimilated. And for when we understand exactly what kind of 'temperamental' we're dealing with."

Svetlana merely raises an eyebrow, saying nothing. She won't let it go. She'll find a way to meet him. I know it. Fuck.

I don't wait for any further response.

I don't know what to think about all this. It *disgusts* me to imagine Nyx spewing his perversion over Dmitry—*worse*, over *Svetlana*. What will he do, get *hard* at her first rudeness? *Beg* like a whore for Dmitry to lose his temper and beat him to death?

Fuck. Damn it. I *need* to keep him controlled. I don't know when Dmitry or Svetlana will come to try to talk to that aberration, but I *know* he expects a reward for his work. And I know—I know *too well*—the headache he causes when he's frustrated. I can't predict what he'll do with my siblings if I don't give him something.

This is against my initial rules. Nyx wasn't supposed to feel minimally satisfied in this place, only controlled. I know I can use pain to make him submit to me, but he expects *more* now.

I take a deep breath. He did the work. Within my impossible timeframe. I need to reward him.

I know what he wants.

My boots hit the marble, carrying me faster than usual down the corridor. The anticipation, a hot and unwanted nervousness, churns in my gut. He is waiting. He is *always* waiting for this, for the breaking of my own rules.

I open the door to his room. He's still in the desk chair, and he turns in it, resting his arms on the top of the backrest to look at me. He smiles at me. He hasn't slept, and it's obvious in his dark circles and contained exhaustion. But the smile is unmistakably Nyx.

"You delivered," I say. The victory over the Malakovs and the secured systems should be satisfying, but his damned satisfaction overshadows it all. "Everything. The Malakovs are bleeding, and the systems are secure. For now."

He tilts his head, resting it on his arms with complicity. "And my reward?" he whispers. His eyes, dilated, burn with an insatiable hunger.

I can feel the heat rising in me.

I loathe this feeling.

"On your knees," I snarl with the bitterness and disgust of my own growing desire.

Slowly, he stands up. That familiar reverence returns to his face, even more pronounced by all the bruises. He walks closer to me.

He kneels.

His head tilts back, exposing the pale line of his throat, his bruised jaw, his slightly swollen lips. His eyes devour my face, burning with raw hunger.

Despite the physical exhaustion of the last 24 hours, the unmistakable bulge in his worn pants begins to rise, pressing against the faded fabric.

Here he is. *This sick fuck.*

I grab the back of his neck and pull his head closer. He gasps, his eyes never leaving mine.

"You earned your reward, Nyx," I say, with contempt.

He stirs, his hands coming up to grip my thighs, eager.

I unzip my fly, and Nyx gazes at my fingers with reverence. I pull my dick out. It throbs against my will in response to the obscene sight of Nyx kneeling and reverent before me, legs open, and the growing bulge in his pants.

He begins to lean forward, already parting his lips, ready.

But I wasn't done. He wouldn't dictate the pace. Not now. Not ever.

I tighten my grip on his hair, pulling his head back sharply, away from my cock. He sighs. Of course, he likes the hostility. His hands on my thighs clench.

"No," I snarl. "*I* dictate what you do. Understood?"

His breath hitches in a small, airy moan. "Yes, sir…"

At least, *I* control this.

I grab his chin, forcing his mouth open wider than he intended. I guide myself, brutally, into his mouth, pushing past his lips until his tongue meets my hardened shaft.

His moan is immediate. He convulses, squeezing my thighs, digging his fingers in. I feel his wetness on my cock, a viscous, sticky warmth that coats me. I sigh. He moves his tongue against me, he *wants* this, and it feels damn good.

I yank back, needing to take in the sight of his face in this raw state: his lips are swollen, smeared with a mess of saliva. His mouth gapes wide, his tongue lolling over his bottom lip, and the sheer obscenity of that expression. His face is flushed, his eyes well up—a delicious sight—, and a thin stream of bright red blood trickles from the corner of his mouth, mixing with the saliva on his chin.

Blood.

My stomach churns. Blood from *where*? The thought is fleeting, replaced by the certainty that I will make his reward a *punishment*. My rage, my disgust, my control, forced into his mouth, bloody or not.

I grab his hair again, pushing his head forward. He opens his mouth even wider, his lips rubbing against my member, licking my erection.

I push him back and forth without giving him breaks to breathe. I push him until I feel the fucking back of his throat, until I hear him gag, until the tears accumulated in his eyes fall. I force my entire dick into his mouth, and hold it there, listening to a choked, gasping moan. I feel his nails gripping my thighs, scratching the fabric of my pants.

I drive my hips forward, making him swallow every inch, showing him zero mercy—faster, deeper. He's powerless. I make that clear to him with every thrust.

His face is red. Sweat beads along his forehead. But he doesn't shake or recoil. He forces himself to endure it, even as the blood from his mouth gets everywhere—on my cock, on his chin, running thin red lines down his

neck. The mixture of saliva and blood drips onto the floor in disgusting drops.

I let go of his hair for one disgusting moment to watch him steady himself, see him struggle not to cough or vomit. He keeps his hands on my thighs, gripping tighter, as if to anchor himself. Then I take his jaw in my hand, and I fuck his mouth harder—shorter, crueler strokes, making him take it, all of it. The sight makes me want to humiliate him more.

He tries to moan, attempts a noise, but my cock blocks the sound in his throat, turning them into nothing but a vibrating whimper and a hot, wet pressure against the shaft. The deeper I go, the more I feel his tongue try to please me—not just resigned to the abuse, but moving, *eager*, desperate for anything I might give him. He must love this. It would make me sick if I wasn't so close to breaking myself.

Every time I pull back, he gasps a breath, then opens his mouth as wide as he can for me, flicking his tongue as if he can't wait for the next assault.

I clench his jaw even harder, holding him in place. He doesn't resist. He submits, utterly, and it burns me that I want this as much as he does. I stare down at him, at his wasted, beautiful, bleeding face. My hips jerk, and my vision blurs. I'm not sure if it's rage, or lust, or both, but I pump hard into his mouth, using him as nothing more than a hole, and he lets me. He wants it.

I can feel the orgasm building. I want to ruin his throat with it. I want to scar him so he never forgets whose he is.

"You like this?" I growl, and he moans around my cock, the vibration going straight through me, almost enough to make me come.

I only hold back so I can see his face when I let go.

For a second, I think about shoving him away, about not giving him what he wants. But the sight of him, the tears and sweat and blood, the way he keeps his mouth wide and tongue out, waiting and worshipful, destroys my last hesitation.

I want to see him swallow every drop.

I fuck his mouth, I grip his hair, jerk his head so he has no escape, and force him to take me.

He doesn't flinch. He moans, closing his eyes and shivering as I fill him.

I drag it out. I keep thrusting, shallow and slow, making sure nothing spills. I stand with my cock still buried in his mouth, breathing heavy, looking down at the mess I've made of him.

As soon as I pull out, I watch him struggle. He doubles over, puts his hands on the floor and coughs, choking. His chin drips cum, blood and saliva, and a mixture of everything spreads across the floor.

It's disgusting. I can't look away.

He kneels there, panting, with his head down.

"Is that what you wanted?" I ask.

He nods. His voice is a broken rasp. "Yes, sir."

I don't let up. He expects cruelty, so I deliver: I yank his head by the hair, forcing him to look up at me, and I slap his cheek. The blood spatter, his head whips to the side.

He closes his legs and moans, with the slightest pressure of his own thighs against his erection.

I crouch, grabbing him by the chin, forcing his blood-streaked face up to mine.

"If you ever cross me," I say, slow and deliberate, "I will rip your fucking throat out for real, understood?"

He nods, eager, *ecstatic*.

I push him away. "Clean yourself up," I order. I can clearly see a wet stain in his pants now.

I turn to leave the room, not daring to look back.

And I hear him laugh. A weak, broken laugh, unmistakably pleased.

It makes me want to scream.

I slam the door behind me, breathing hard, shaking with the aftermath.

Let Dmitry draft his contract. Let Svetlana see the beast. None of them would ever understand what it took to break a monster like Nyx.

But I did.

And I hate myself for it.

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THIRTEEN

LEO

THERE'S blood and cum on my tongue. The blood is mine; a cracked molar, nearly split. The cum is his, and I taste it, bitter and thick as glue in the back of my throat.

Dante didn't even look at me when he slammed the door. Didn't pause, didn't ask. He just left me on the floor, on my knees, vibrating with the kind of pain that only gets better the more it hurts.

Fuck. He made me come untouched.

I spit into the trash can under the desk: pink foam. My mouth still works through the half-numb agony—my molar is definitely done for. Every time I bite down, the pain fires through my whole head and sets off a shudder down my spine that somehow ends in my groin. Turns out cum—and Dante's harshness—is inflammatory. The swelling in my gums pulsates like a heart. I give it less than twelve hours before my jaw swells up.

I stumble towards the en-suite bathroom. The mirror reflects a wreck: bruised jaw, red cheek, swollen lips, a smear of blood and cum painting my chin and neck. So this is what Dante brings out.

I lean closer to the mirror, opening my mouth and pulling down my bottom lip. A jagged shard like a tiny mountain peak, a fresh tear in the gum around it, oozing crimson. It looks bad. Really bad.

He did this. Dante. It's a brand. A physical mark of his control, his presence in me. My own fucked-up keepsake.

I turn on the faucet, splashing cold water on my face, scrubbing at the fluids. I clean—as I can—my mouth and teeth, I shower, but the phantom marks of his hands are under my skin.

I'm exhausted. The physical toll of the last day, coupled with the emotional whiplash of being back with Dante, has drained me.

I walk back into the main room, bare-chested despite the cold, toweling my hair dry. I eye the bed, stark white, pristine. Maybe a few hours. Just enough to recharge.

Just as I'm about to reach for the covers, I hear a soft knock on the main door.

Dante wouldn't be back so soon, and Luca doesn't knock.

The door opens, revealing a figure silhouetted against the bright hallway lights of the mansion.

I freeze. She's fucking beautiful.

She's a tall, elegant woman, with long, chemically straightened dark hair slicked back, highlighting her prominent cheekbones. Her ice-green eyes are hidden behind small, thin-rimmed, rounded elliptical glasses.

She scans the room. The desk, the made bed, the half-open bathroom door. And then she looks at me.

I feel a little self-conscious. If I had known I'd have a visitor, I would've gotten dressed.

She runs her eyes over my body without disguising it. The bruises, the random swellings. It's not hard to see with the paleness of my skin.

Only then does she look me in the eyes.

"Nyx, I presume?"

Her voice is clear and as icy as the color of her irises.

She's beautiful. And the shape of her face, her nose, somehow reminds me of Dante. Their skin tone, at least, is identical.

"Only online," I correct, stretching my jaw slightly. Now with the back of my mouth throbbing, I have difficulty articulating properly. "It's Leonel. Leo, actually."

She tilts her chin. She looks like an executive who humiliates her employees. I mean it as a compliment.

"Of course. Leo. I'm Svetlana Volkov. Dante's sister." She extends her hand. I shake it firmly. Her skin is icy. "I admit I expected a *woman* at first—the goddess *Nyx*. I heard you worked miracles with our systems. Twenty-four hours is impressive. Truly."

"I just did my job," I say, shrugging, trying to appear nonchalant despite the pulsing in my mouth. My eyes flicker to the porcelain flower shards on the floor by the wall. I wonder if she noticed. She doesn't react.

Svetlana's gaze sweeps over me again, lingering on a bruise below my ribs. "My brother seems quite impressed. Though he's rather... *protective* of his assets. Especially the valuable ones."

She's analyzing the bruises. And she 100% believes Dante's "methods" involve beating me up until I comply.

Not that it's far from it.

"He has his methods," I agree, a phantom warmth coiling in my stomach at the thought of Dante's hands on me. I suppress it. It would be indelicate to get hard in front of her. "They're effective."

She arches her eyebrows and gives me a half-smile. She stares at the bruises again. She's judging. "I imagine. We need to ensure that efficiency continues. My brother has been rather... *vague* about the details of your operation." She steps closer, walking directly to the desk. I don't know how she maintains such perfect balance in such thin heels. "I insisted on coming to meet you, Leonel. Before you delve back into our systems, I have a personal request; a small favor, so to speak."

She maintains eye contact while I grab a hoodie from my backpack—abandoned and stripped of all devices—to cover myself. She doesn't seem to care.

"I was informed that you, besides having helped us before, were the first to point out the existence of someone infiltrating our networks. I deeply respect my brother, but his approaches tend to be too direct. We haven't found anything physical in the routines of anyone on the team, and that alarms me more than it reassures me… therefore, I would like someone to go deeper. I want to dissect the digital life of our personnel, especially within the time period when our internal information began to leak. I compiled a list of some of our collaborators with technological access."

Svetlana pulls a small external drive from inside her blazer.

"I will let you have your fun with this. I want you to analyze all their data history inside and outside the company, regardless of whether it's personal or not. Of course, we don't want any unwanted attention... So while your sick leave lasts, I want you to file at least 30% of this list. Consider this your primary directive. Your continued comfort here depends on your success."

She delicately places the drive on the desk, next to the computer keyboard.

I never told them about my sick leave, but of course they know. This is the kind of mundane work I hate, though rummaging through strangers' personal lives has a certain appeal… I *suppose.*

"I understand," I say. Perhaps my *comfort* would be better spent with my wrists handcuffed, trapped in some dungeon. I wonder if Dante agrees with this, if he would pay me in some way. "I'll do it."

She gives me a restrained smile. "Good. If you need anything at all, do not hesitate to ask Luca. He will ensure your needs are met." Her eyes settle on my bruised jaw and linger on the corner of my mouth, on the swelling. "And Leonel," she adds, quieter, "if my brother's methods become counterproductive, let me know. We value our resources. And we do not tolerate unnecessary damage." She then steps away from the desk and strides to the door. "Dante will be informed of your new assignment."

I stare at the external drive on the desk. A bland, rectangular piece of plastic. A monument to boredom. This is *her* idea of torture. Endless, mind-numbing data.

Svetlana, for all her icy beauty and calculating eyes, is so utterly conventional in her cruelty.

She thinks comfort is a soft bed and a clean room, but that doesn't quench the thirst he ignited in me. He beats me, she gives me a file. What's the fucking difference?

If Dante's going to give me more of himself each time, then I already place him in a position of importance above my daily work. The work here is similar—more challenging and more interesting, just not enough to sustain me—so the aspect that matters most to me, once again, is him.

I need him not to cast me aside. I can put up with empty tasks as long as he doesn't drown me completely in monotony. Ultimately, this brings me back to what consumed me for an entire week before I was locked in this velvet cage. If Dante needs me against his own will, there will be no monotony. Only him.

I guess there's nothing left for me to do but perform work that surpasses the pragmatic expectations of the ice queen that is his sister… and, of course, his own.

Thinking of the free pass Svetlana gave me, I walk to the door. Of course, it's locked—I can't leave here. I knock on it three times.

Speaking, now, hurts. "Luca?" I exclaim.

After a second or two, I hear his voice. *Reduced to a doorkeeper, Luca?*

"*Yes, Mr. Hays?*" he calls me by my surname. I don't like formality, and I feel in his tone of voice that he *also* loathes speaking formally to me like this. Why would he owe *me* respect?

"You know where I work," I say, because they surely already do. "Can you call there and ask Nicole to water my fern?"

The ensuing silence makes me think he's gone.

"*What?*"

"My fern."

I lean my bruised head against the door, closing my eyes. There's an eternity of silence.

He asks, *"That's all?"*

"That's all," I say. The words send a fresh jolt through my jaw. The pain is chemical. Makes me feel alive.

There's another pause. Then a quiet, almost defeated sound.

"I… will comply. Sir."

He is utterly disgusted to call me sir.

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FOURTEEN

DANTE

"YOU HAD no right to go in there, Svetlana! I told you, he's my problem!"

Svetlana tends to go behind my back, and every single time it's the same. I hate it. I hate that she steps all over me because she *thinks* she's smarter, more above it all, when Nyx requires *so much more* than a fucking MBA in economics.

"He's a crucial asset!" she snaps back. "I needed to evaluate his capabilities—what were you so afraid I'd see? That you beat him until he was purple? Those bruises are fresh, Donya."

The nickname irritates me. Svetlana reduces me to this, to brute force, and expects me to punch my way through every path. The way she says it grates on me. She thinks his marks are just my mismanaged brutality. She has no idea.

"I wasn't—I was *protecting* you!" I say. It's not worth explaining that Nyx provoked all of it. "He's not like the other assets. He's crazy. Volatile. You can't just talk to him..."

"Oh, I talked to him, Donya, and he didn't seem crazy, just fucking depressed."

Nyx, *depressed*?

He might have self-destructive tendencies, but there's so much *perversion* in them that pinning the 'poor thing' label on him like Svetlana is trying to shove down my throat is impossible to swallow.

Dmitry, listening from the corner of the room, says, "She's right, Donya. He just saved us millions. We need to integrate him."

The intellectual duo. They always have each other's backs.

"You *knew*?" I confront him, already knowing the answer. Fucking irresponsible. "You knew she was going to talk to that freak? You let her go in there alone?"

"She's not a child, Donya."

No. But dealing with Nyx is a task I wouldn't wish on anyone, let alone my siblings. Just imagining him putting on the same show for them that he did for me makes my blood boil with an unbearable heat.

"Your *freak* was perfectly articulate, completely lucid, and remarkably normal," she says. "Leonel was even polite."

The name hits me. So out of place.

"Who?"

"Our asset!" She exclaims, exasperated. "His real name, Dante! Did you not even read the initial intelligence report? My God, you're insufferable!"

Leonel.

Such a mundane name.

I must have read it. At some point. I just didn't register it. How could I call *that thing* such a trivial name? *Nyx* just felt right.

"You just… called him whatever you wanted?" Dmitry says, hiding a laugh, and I raise my voice.

"It's irrelevant! His name isn't the problem! His mind is the problem! His *perversions* are the problem! You saw what he did in 24 hours! Do you think that's normal for a Leonel?"

"He didn't seem bothered by my presence," Svetlana says, adjusting the lapels of her blazer. She sighs before forcing herself to calm down. "He was tired, yes, but efficient. He introduced himself, I gave him the drive. That's it."

It gets more unbelievable with every sentence.

"And you just… gave him the drive? You let him tamper with our data? He could be implanting anything!"

She glares at me. "He's in a locked room, Donya," she says slowly. "And the drives are encrypted, analyzed copies. He has no external access. He's perfectly contained. And do you know the only thing he asked for, after agreeing to dissect every digital aspect of our goddamn organization, after being beaten with all your 'specific approaches'? He asked for Luca to

call a woman—a *girlfriend*, I don't fucking know—and ask her to water his fern. His fucking fern."

My vision blurs. *Girlfriend*? He has a fucking *girlfriend*? And he's worried about a *fern*?

This isn't Nyx. This is… some domesticated idiot. My stomach churns, and I feel nauseous. He was letting me fuck his mouth while what? Thinking about a fucking girlfriend watering a fern?

"What?"

"His fern, Dante," Svetlana says, her voice rising again. "He asked Luca to make sure it was taken care of."

No. This image of innocence, of someone who just did what he did for money, that's not him.

I tense my entire body. She thinks I'm crazy.

"Ask Luca!" I yell. "Ask Luca what kind of man he is!"

Svetlana crosses her arms. She thinks. Luca is the most principled man in our business, a simple person. He was there. He saw.

"Fine," she says grudgingly. She taps her stiletto heel against the marble floor and walks over to the general staff intercom. She unplugs the phone and dials the code for Luca's line. "Luca. Please come up to the conference room."

I try to hold back the irritation of needing an outside report on this. Svetlana might see me as a brute, but Luca's word *has* to carry its weight.

Luca appears shortly, a nervous look on his face. He walks in, and I stare at him. *You're dead if you fuck this up.*

"Tell us about Leonel," Svetlana says. "My brother here seems to think he's some kind of monster. Is he?"

Luca looks at me. At her, at Dmitry. He's never seen us together in the same room, and his hesitation is obvious.

I clear my throat.

He flinches.

I'm not kidding, Luca.

"Mr. Volkov…," he starts, "beat him… and he… he liked it…."

That's it. That's the report from my best man. He just stands there, shaking his head, and Svetlana lets out a pure frustrated sigh, pressing her own forehead as if to relieve a headache. Dmitry lets out a choked sound, trying not to laugh.

Luca looks at me. He doesn't know why I'm warning him with my eyes that I *will* kill him, and it frustrates me even more.

"I-I mean," he stutters. *Fix this shit.* "I'm wary of him too, Mrs. Volkov, he's unpredictable..."

Svetlana stares at him. "Is he violent?"

"Uh… Negative, miss."

"Does he break contracts, agreements?"

"I don't know—"

She turns sharply to me. "Dante?"

I say, "No, but—"

"I just don't understand you, Dante. At *all*."

I stare at my siblings, at Dmitry's barely suppressed laughter and Svetlana's genuine confusion. They deal with money and power, not with whatever the fuck Nyx is.

I can't tell them. I can't tell my brother and sister, who have always seen me as a force of nature, that a scrawny hacker with a fetish for pain has reduced me to a confused animal—how the fuck could I? I can't tell them that he gets hard when I hurt him, and that the sight makes my own blood burn, or let *them* experience this.

Dmitry opens his mouth to say something, another logical and useless solution, but I raise a hand in a short, final gesture. There is nothing left to say. They will never understand.

Without another word, I turn my back on the two of them and leave the room. I need something to punch. Something that doesn't moan with pleasure when it bleeds.

THE ONLY PLACE WHERE THE RAGE THE WORLD GIVES ME CAN BE converted into something productive, something that doesn't involve perversion, is the gym. Where a punching bag doesn't moan, doesn't smile, doesn't ask for more. Where the only thing that bleeds is my body.

My fists are wrapped, the skin of my knuckles long since raw before I even arrived here.

I throw my last punch with everything I have. The metal chain swings with the force of the impact, and I step back, breathless. I grab the towel

from the floor, wiping the sweat from my brow.

That's when I hear the voice behind me.

"Svetlana is furious. She thinks you're a brute who solves everything with force."

I turn, seeing Dmitry leaning against the door in his impeccable suit, disapproving. He's calm, controlled, the complete opposite of me.

"She doesn't understand," I grunt, tossing the towel to the floor. "She thinks everything can be solved with an Excel spreadsheet."

"I understand even less. You've broken a man's hand for spilling a drink on your shoe, Dante. Since when do you care if an asset 'likes' to get beaten? What's so different about this kid?"

What's so different about him?

I know why Svetlana is furious with this idea—the idea that I just beat a man to force him to work for me. It's for the same reason *I* am. I'm *disappointed* in myself for making her think I would do that. Violate for the sake of violating.

So many times, I put myself up as a shield for her. More than I can count. Even before I was of age, while Dmitry hid in a crawl space under the floorboards, I offered myself and forced myself to take the violence for her, in the face of a Mr. Volkov altered by a sick rage.

He never needed reasons to hurt anyone—not even us. He broke two of my fingers with a wooden hammer. Fractured Dmitry's ribs and put out cigarettes on Svetlana.

She didn't like me trying to spare her from it, either. She grew to have an aversion to it after realizing I was also susceptible to the same violence as our father.

I remember it, too. I remember losing control for the first time.

Our father exposed us to how things work in the underworld from the cradle—my siblings and I saw executions that looked like animalistic attacks. Deaths drawn out by the sadism of people who did little to deserve it. I felt disgust. I know our line of work, and I know that things *are* like this, but my father didn't see it as *work*. They weren't consequences of a wrong life and they didn't weigh on his shoulders. It was *entertainment*.

And I never thought properly about what that meant—how much he wanted me to follow in his footsteps—until I lost control.

A random person. An arrogant businessman at a meeting table with Svetlana and me. An event, with people around; witnesses. They were

discussing business, and Svetlana was winning the debate—of course she was, she always wins. But the idiot, with his ill-fitting suit and his smug smile, wouldn't stop interrupting her. Calling her *sweetheart*. The irritation boiled in my stomach—the insolence. The pure, arrogant stupidity of a sewer rat trying to win a strategic debate with passive humiliation. He didn't see a Volkov. He only saw a woman.

I kept repeating to myself that it was just a job, all the while muffling all the stupidity of that businessman who only showed the bare minimum of respect when *I* opened my mouth. He spoke to my sister as if she were a waitress. Svetlana belonged in this world of power as much as I did. Her blood was my blood. Her name was my name.

I don't remember what he said before he died. After Svetlana had torn through all his terrible arguments, he said something. Something about her place, about her usefulness as if she were a cheap whore. He took the name Volkov, a name forged in blood, and dragged it through the mud.

I stood up. I don't remember deciding to stand up. I didn't look at Svetlana. I didn't look at anyone. My eyes were fixed on the stain, on the smiling worm who still didn't understand he had just signed his own death warrant. The mantra in my head—*it's just a job*—went silent. Everything did. And then, my hands did what they were born to do.

When the silence disappeared, I only heard a sharp ringing. And screams. A police or ambulance siren—I don't know. And I was breathless, my hands raw and covered in red. The blood was his and mine, from where my knuckles had burst open. I shattered his head until it was unrecognizable.

The disgust I felt for him was nothing compared to the disgust I felt for myself. For the part of me that had *enjoyed* it.

My father had never looked at me with so much pride before that. I had converted to him, and Svetlana knows it. She knows that whatever was in our father is also in me.

And Nyx.

He looks at me with those pale, unnerving eyes, and he sees a kindred spirit. He sees the monster I've spent half my life trying to bury. And he begs for it. He moans for it. He *gets hard* for it.

What is so different about him?

He is the only person I have ever met who looks at the worst part of me—the part I inherited from my father, the *only* part that terrifies me—and

calls it salvation.

"He's not... he's not normal," I say. I walk to the leather-padded bench in the corner of the gym and sit down. There's no way to explain how sick Nyx can be. "He asked me to... to hurt him."

Dmitry approaches me. In silence, he sits down next to me. "And you did?"

He knows me well enough to know the answer is yes.

"He was provoking me. And he... he *liked* it. He doesn't mind getting beaten, Dmitry. He wants more."

The sight of Nyx's smile, the blood on his lips, the admiration in his eyes, haunts me. I remember the pleasure he felt, and the bile rises in my throat.

"But *you* mind the beating," Dmitry states, without preamble. "Why?"

My shame and my disgust are not for Nyx. They're for myself.

Dmitry sighs, carrying years of living with my explosive temper. He knows that rage is my armor.

"Donya," he says. He uses that nickname that I hate. "Sveta said the kid's face is all messed up. You know we love you, but... you need more control."

Control abandoned me from the moment I pointed a gun at Nyx's head. That night was my cataclysm.

The whisper comes out before I can think. "I am not my father."

I don't look at Dmitry. I stare at the wraps on my knuckles, the reddish spots that start to appear. I try to convince myself. *I'm not my father and I don't see pleasure in hurting someone else.*

I've been trying to convince myself of that for years.

I feel Dmitry's hand on my back. A brother's gesture, one I would have gladly received years ago. Now, it only serves to remind me how exposed I am.

"No, Donya. You're much better."

I don't answer. I don't know how. To thank him would be a weakness. To disagree would give voice to the monster.

"Sveta is just worried," Dmitry continues, with that calm, irritating voice of someone who always knows the right thing to say. "I know you don't want to hear this, but she's right. The kid is a valuable asset. Maybe... maybe we should treat him as such. Give him what he wants, within limits, to keep him cooperating."

Of course. And there it is again, the normalization of what they think is just another fucking asset. I stare at him. For him, it's trivial.

"You have no idea what he wants, Dima. You think he's one of your programmers who gets satisfied with an end-of-year bonus?"

Dmitry shrugs. "Whatever it is. Pain, attention, a leather whip with the Volkov logo, or his girlfriend tending to a fern. What does it matter? It's a means to an end. If he needs to get beaten to code better, then we hire a goon to do the job. Problem solved."

I stand up abruptly.

"You don't understand a fucking thing. Svetlana thinks he's a depressed wretch. You think he's an HR problem that can be solved with a standard procedure. You're *both* wrong."

I turn, not caring about the towel on the floor. I don't know what Nyx said to Svetlana, I don't know what kind of shit he's plotting now, and I need to fix it.

I feel Dmitry's eyes on my back. "Where are you going? We were doing so well..."

I open the gym door and slam it shut behind me, on my way to the demon who calls me salvation.

THE DOOR TO HIS ROOM OPENS, THE SILENT SOUND OF METAL AGAINST concrete echoing in the quiet. I slam it shut behind me, the final, loud thud a full stop. I don't give a damn about knocking. This is *my* house, *my* problem.

"What the fuck did you tell my siblings?" I growl, crossing the distance between us in a few long strides. He's sitting at the desk, hunched over his computer, but I don't care about his work. I care about what he did to me. "What did you say to them to make them think you're a victim? That you're... *depressed*?"

He turns his face, his body unmoving. The bruises on his jaw and cheek have deepened to a nauseating shade of purple, but what I notice now is the swelling. His entire left side is swollen, distorting his once-angular features. He looks like he lost a fight with a beehive.

"What are you talking about?" he says, his voice slurred.

I slam my hands on the table, leaning over him. "You're a fucking maniac! You get off on being humiliated! And what about the fucking fern, huh? A *girlfriend*? You, who bleeds and moans for me, who begs me to hurt you, are worried about having your little girlfriend tending to a fucking houseplant?"

His face, usually so expressive in its perversion, only twists into a pained frown. "Mister—I don't understand," he says, moving his jaw in a strange, locked way. "Are you mad because I have a plant?"

I look at his jaw again, at the grotesque swelling. He can barely speak properly.

"What the fuck is wrong with your face?"

He doesn't flinch. He just gives a small smile. "It's just a souvenir. You gave it to me."

"You're talking like you have a golf ball in your mouth. Let me see."

He doesn't pull away when I grab his chin with force and press my thumb against his lower lip. I've never touched him with such care—this swelling makes him look even more fragile, and he obeys the pressure of my touch, opening his mouth and looking at me with that curious, obscene fervor sparking in his eyes. I ignore it, carefully pulling his lip away to see what's going on.

In the back of his dental arch, it's pretty obvious. I don't need to search. One of his molars is practically split open, with the swollen, reddish pulp underneath. It's clearly inflamed and mirrored in the surrounding gum, and it's disgusting, grotesque. This isn't from *one* careless day. It's a miracle he can articulate at all.

I let go of him. He closes his mouth, but his teeth don't touch—of course not, it must hurt like hell.

"What the fuck is that?" I say, tense.

"A molar," he replies as if it's simple, as if it's nothing. "The nerve is exposed."

The image of the other night flashes through my mind. The blood. The way his mouth was a mix of spit and red. I didn't think about it at the time—I figured it was just a cut, a small wound on his lips. Not... this. Not a broken tooth.

"You were spitting blood all over my cock—why the hell didn't you say anything?" I growl, my voice filled with self-directed disgust. He's not taking it seriously. He's satisfied.

"I had my mouth busy, mister… and it's a mark of your touch. I like it."

Fuck, this is different. The idea of him walking around with a broken tooth, a living testament to my brutality, makes me want to vomit. It's grotesque. It's one thing for him to say he gets off on a controlled punch, it's another to have this, something I can't control.

I don't know where this thought is taking me. It's strange territory that I'm even justifying his sick pleasure.

"You're fucking crazy. Do you think about this while you eat? That you have a piece of me in your mouth?" I say with disgust.

"No," he says hoarsely, and my body freezes, bracing for a new wave of depravity. "But it's a reminder of what you do to me." He pauses, staring at my groin for a split second. "I thought you would press it, you know. My molar. I fantasized about it."

He pronounces each word as if he's genuinely getting turned on at the thought of someone pressing an inflamed tooth. It makes me sick.

"I don't like hurting you, you sick fuck."

"You don't?" he whispers. The sound sends a shiver down my arms. "It didn't seem like it. You fucked my mouth until I gagged. Want to do it again?"

A wave of pure nausea hits me. The idea of that sound… that wet, nauseating sound of sucking and swallowing…

"This is ridiculous," I say, trying to sink the heat that appears against my will. *Damn it*, I tell myself I don't take pleasure in hurting him, but his reactions stir something in me far more than they should. And I *know* he would love for me to do it again. "You need a dentist."

I retreat to snatch up my phone. The most reliable, discreet dentist we can find—I emphasize it's urgent as Nyx continues to gaze at me, captivated and expectant. He's a disaster, but for some reason, I can't quite grasp why I find him beautiful, in a messed-up way.

"Don't move," I order. "Don't do anything but wait for the dentist. Understood?"

He nods, with that horrible reverence.

I lean against the wall, running a hand through my hair. The idea of him thinking about our encounter while chewing is mental poison.

His heavy breathing fills the room. He's watching me. I can feel it.

"Since you're going to fix it..." he says, still hoarse from the swelling and the throbbing in his mouth. "This will be my last chance for a while.

Give me a real kiss. One that makes me bleed."

I see the plea in his eyes. He's challenging me. Pressing me to embrace the violence he craves. It's a coward's game, and I hate being seconds away from losing.

The request echoes in my head.

One that makes me bleed.

It's disgusting. It's insane. *He's* insane, and so am I for even considering it. He wants a bloody kiss like a fucking teenager wants a first kiss—a kiss stained with the coppery taste of his own blood.

And yet…

My hands clench at my sides. A muscle in my jaw twitches. I want to tell him no. I want to turn around, open the door, and let the fucking dentist deal with his sick fantasies. But I can't. Not when he looks at me like that, like I'm the only one who can give him what he wants.

I take a step. He doesn't move, just watches me. I can see the pulse in his neck, the way his chest rises and falls with each ragged breath.

I stop in front of him. My hand, without my permission, raises. I grab a handful of his messy black hair, pulling his head up, forcing him to look at me, exactly how I know he likes it.

"You don't learn, do you, you worm?" I snarl, and he moans in pleasure.

"No. I don't."

I smash my mouth against his, a violent collision of rage and desire. I force my way in, which he gives up immediately, and I slide my tongue over his. It doesn't take long for the taste of blood to appear, hot and coppery.

He doesn't flinch. He just moans, vibrating against my lips, and digs his fingers into my shirt in a frantic, possessive clawing. He's all in, and his surrender is so complete it feels like a victory.

I deepen the kiss, biting down on his lower lip until a fresh trickle of blood mixes with the old. He whimpers, pleased. The surge of heat is so intense that it almost burns. My hand tightens in his hair, and I use it to tilt his head, to dominate his mouth, to prove that I am in control, even when I'm losing it completely.

I pull away, breathless. His face is a bloody, ecstatic mess, with his swollen lips glistening with saliva and blood. I feel it on mine, too.

"About before, mister," he whispers. "Were you mad about the plant… or the girlfriend? Because I don't have one."

He leans in, pressing his bruised lips against mine again. This time, the kiss is different. It's softer. Possessive.

His hand rests on my chest, his fingers splayed over my heart, and he pushes me closer, his mouth moving against mine in a gentle rhythm. It's… *new.* Doesn't feel like a fight.

I want to pull away. I should. But my hands, still tangled in his hair, don't let go. Instead, they loosen their grip, almost caressing the strands. It's a complete inversion of everything that just happened, and it's a thousand times more unsettling.

This gentle touch, this soft claim, is a deeper violation of my control than any punch I've ever thrown. It's not about hurting him anymore, it's about… *this*. Whatever the fuck this is.

He groans into my mouth, and I feel a shiver of... something I refuse to name. It's not disgust. It's not rage. It's terrifying.

Then, a knock on the door. "*Mr. Volkov? The dentist is here.*"

I rip myself away from him as if he were on fire. My lungs burn.

I look at him. He's a bloody, ecstatic mess, his mouth swollen and glistening. But the smile that creeps back onto his face is a knowing curve of his lips, filled with a triumphant affection.

"See you later, mister," he murmurs.

I turn my back on him, disgusted and electrified, and open the door. The dentist's professional gaze lands on me, then glances past me to Nyx.

I don't look back. I can't. Not after that.

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CHAPTER V

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FIFTEEN

LEO

THE DENTIST, a man named Dr. Alistair who looked perpetually terrified, had fixed my molar. He had to numb my entire jaw, and the process was a blur of drills, lights, and the sickly sweet smell of antiseptic.

I replayed that kiss in my head all night. It made me miss the pain. The anesthesia turned it into a dull ache. A cruel kindness. I wanted the searing, sharp throb, to remind me of him, not this anesthetic's phantom limb.

I kept replaying it. Dante shouting about a fern and a *girlfriend*. Nicole, I suppose—although I never told Luca about any relationship, he probably presumed we had one. It was absurd. And it made me feel warm. Dante was thinking about me, even when he was away. He wasn't mad about a security breach or a stupid song; he was mad about *a plant.* My mundane life. I had a life he couldn't touch.

And that *fucking* kiss—the one that wasn't a fight. His hands in my hair. *Gentle*, as I'd never dare to imagine Dante's touch. It scared him. I saw it in his eyes.

He didn't come back.

My routine, far from Dante, began with Luca knocking on my door the next morning.

"Hays," he calls. "Mrs. Volkov asked you to solve a problem with IT."

I'm escorted out of my room, no longer blindfolded, and led through the labyrinthine corridors of the mansion. During those days, my escort would change. Sometimes it was Luca; other times, a different guard, but equally

stoic. They treat me now with a strange mix of caution and respect—the boss's new pet who earned the right to roam the house.

The first destination is always the main control room. Sal and his team of nerds huddle in a panic probably caused by their own incompetence. Everyone looks at me when I walk in. Those who *don't* know me have already *heard* of me.

Sal approaches with more caution than necessary. "Nyx?" His question sounds like some kind of request for permission to call me Nyx. He is too nervous to wait for me to answer. "We have a problem with the communication network. We're trying to update it to a quantum communication system..."

I sit at a terminal and type my magic. Their "problems," I find out, are usually simple glitches I can fix in minutes. It's like going back to Chad's cubicle, but with higher stakes. I fix, I write reports, and I go back to digging into the lives of a list of strangers in a gray room.

My usefulness is my currency. They need me. I need them to need me. It's symbiotic.

The favors start small. A nervous junior programmer approaches me in the middle of the hallway while I'm being escorted, and seems more nervous around me than with the seven-foot-tall guards.

"Mr. Hays," he whispers, without looking me in the eyes. "Could you... could you help me with a subroutine? It's a personal project, nothing... nothing big..."

Luca shrugs. He doesn't care what I do as long as it doesn't irritate the Volkovs, and my status is a strange and fluid thing. I am both a prisoner and an asset. And assets are treated well.

So I help. And soon, the requests become a constant flood, from the IT geeks to the capos.

"Leonel, can you check this cargo tracking system that the Venice police are using?"

"Mr. Hays, we're having trouble with the new casino accounting software. Can you take a look?"

"Mr. Nyx, the surveillance system we use for our vehicle fleet has a hole. Can you fix the code?"

I'm escorted to a dozen different rooms in the mansion. The main ops room, a sterile server room, a smaller office for financial analysts, even a

large, empty conference room where a half-dozen men with tired eyes wait for me to explain a bug in their code.

I'm no longer just a ghost in the machine. I'm part of it. An essential cog in the Volkov empire.

Even Luca, my silent guard, approaches me now. He stopped calling me *sir*. He says, "Can you... can you check some footage for me? The warehouse cameras went blank… I don't want to bother Mr. Volkov."

And, of course, I check the footage.

I am everywhere. I am in every department. I am a part of their lives, being absorbed into their routine, into their monotony.

And then I realized. The true torture.

It starts with a slow, creeping fear. No one wants to bother the bosses—I understand. The Volkovs can be scary. So it quickly becomes a good practice that problems, before they get bigger and reach the Volkovs' ears, pass through me. The boss' pet. My service is basically trafficked among those who have access to the mansion—a select group of trusted people of the Volkovs.

I would appreciate that. But things that should be directed to Sal's team start to come directly at *me*, and I deal with it, because—let's be honest—Sal would waste at least two hours on things that'd take me minutes.

Then the requests *never* stop. The problems are endless. The faces change, but the work is the same. It's all a new cubicle, a bigger gray box.

I sit at a terminal, numb with data. My retinas burn because of the bright lights and my body aches with a familiar pain—not Dante's, but complaints of untreated hyperkyphosis and muscle cramps. I look at the lines of code and there is no adrenaline there. Just the same devastating boredom that led me to hack the Volkovs in the first place.

I go back to my room with my head spinning. I traded my cubicle for a mansion and my fern for a family of mobsters, but the excitement is already fading.

I lean my head on the keyboard and let the plastic keys mark my face. Favors that don't reach the boss don't make me gain Dante's attention, and, in this endless weekend, he doesn't come back.

It's just me, favors, and a fading ache from a recently fixed molar for Svetlana's endless list of collaborators—recovering emails, locations, logs, calls, and hacking into personal accounts without being detected.

The rest of my sick leave—and all the available time off I accumulated in a few years of uninterrupted monotonous work—is spent entirely in this mansion.

LUCA ACCOMPANIES ME BACK TO MY ROOM. I DON'T HAVE MUCH SENSE OF time while working for the Volkovs, so my only clue that it's already evening is the dark windows and the silence throughout most of the rooms. It's this silence that makes me notice a growing buzz as we approach the corridor outside my room.

We pass a large game room with a polished ebony poker table—a path that is now familiar—and all the buzzing comes from there.

This room, which used to smell of cigars and whiskey, is now almost unbreathable. I see tobacco smoke and some men I recognize from the hallways—men who look like they've stepped out of a cliché gangster movie, all in suits with visible scars—sitting around the poker table. They are names I've heard whispered in the control room: Marco, Grigory, Ruslan. They're capos.

"Full house," says a man I now recognize as Marco—he has a burn scar on his neck, exactly like the rumors—pointing to his cards. "Pure skill, my friend. Pure skill."

"Bullshit," grumbles Grigory, the tallest one, throwing his cards on the table. "You just got lucky."

The man sitting in a corner looks up. That must be Ruslan. I heard he collects knives—he's the only one with one tucked into his waistband.

He stares at me. I'd ignore him if he didn't talk about me.

"Hey, Luca," he calls out. "Is that the one who fixes everything?"

Marco stares at me. "Is that the IT kid? The one who looks at a screen and money appears?"

Ruslan laughs. It's an unpleasant sound. "The one and only. Damn, Dante did a number on you, huh?" He says to me, jeering, though it doesn't sound as venomous as I'd imagined it would. The bruises are still apparent on me. "I heard you liked it. Got a hard-on. Is that true?" He winks at me. It's true.

I feel Luca tense up beside me. He doesn't think this is a good idea.

"Leave him be, Ruslan," Luca says.

"Oh, come on, Luca. He's brave, isn't he?" Ruslan pushes a chair back with his foot, inviting me to sit. "Can you count cards, or are all IT nerds chickenshits like Sal?"

Brave? What a joke. I'm bored. The thought of another night staring at a glowing monitor and sifting through random lives is a form of torture I can no longer endure today. This, at least, is new.

"Sure," I say.

Luca looks at me, looks at Ruslan, then back at me. I bet he's wondering if he should call Dante (I almost hope he does). I don't wait for him to release me to go to the table and sit down, but at some point, he nods. He stays near the door, staring at me as if I'm throwing myself in front of three hungry tigers. That option would be more fun.

It's a bit ridiculous. I'm the youngest in the room by at least ten years—not that that's anything new since I stepped into this mansion. The capos think I'm practically a civilian in their world. The disdain is obvious, mixed with curiosity, as the game begins.

I'm dealt a hand. A pair of tens. It's a solid start. But I don't play. I fold, with a silent click of my chips on the table. The others look at me with a certain contempt for not surprising anyone. I just watch them play the hand.

I don't pay much attention to the cards. I'd rather watch them.

Marco, with his neck scar, has a tell: a quick blink of his left eye whenever he's bluffing. It's a tic, a nervous spasm he can't control. Grigory, the likely oldest man with a perpetually grumpy face, scratches his chin with his index finger when he has a strong hand, and has a nervous tremor in his hand when he feels pressured—which happens often. It's almost imperceptible, but it makes his chips rattle against the felt. Ruslan, on the other hand, is the most obvious. He can't stop looking at his own hand when it's bad, thinking about how he could make it good. It's just code. A human algorithm.

I lose a small, insignificant amount of chips in the first few hands by barely looking at the cards as anything more than evidence for their tells. They laugh. They think I'm Sal.

"Look at the brilliant IT nerd," Grigory says, taking the pot. "He folds with a good hand and bets on nothing."

"Computers don't teach you about luck," Marco grumbles.

I don't react. I don't care. I've heard better taunts.

I get another hand, a low pair. It's a shitty hand, but I think I have a solid enough foundation now.

Marco folds first. He didn't hide his disdain when he turned over his cards; he didn't even want to try. Grigory raises, Ruslan calls.

In the second round, instead of just calling to stay in the game, I raise. It's a reckless bet that makes all of them look at me as they would a dog who shits on the living room sofa. Unpleasant.

"What, feeling lucky, kid?" Ruslan asks. He lets out a mocking laugh. "Or did your little brain finally overheat?"

I don't answer. I know he's bluffing. He can't stop looking at his own hand.

"Come on, kid. Bet again," Grigory growls. He doesn't like this. He's feeling pressured. "Or are you gonna cry to Mommy? Think your pretty face will save you from losing everything?"

Feeling pressured is a sign. He doesn't want to risk losing to the nerd.

I raise again.

I look at my shitty cards. I look at Grigory. He's pissed.

Ruslan lets out a sarcastic laugh and folds, throwing his cards on the table. He curses under his breath, "Fucking kid." He's out of the round.

Grigory, the survivor, stares at me, scratching his chin. He has a strong hand and doesn't want to fold, but my bet caught him off guard.

He curses at me.

"Idiot. You don't know what you're doing," he says.

I smile at him. I don't say anything. I see a drop of sweat on his forehead. Really, losing to the boss's little IT kid would be a disgrace.

He looks at his cards, looks at me. Looks at the chips. He coughs.

"Fuck it," he says, throwing his cards face down on the table. "I fold."

Then they all lean in for the showdown—wondering what I could have in my hand to call out Grigory, the biggest of them all with the worst scowl.

Grigory turns his cards over first—a king and a jack. The entire table falls silent. In the community cards, there was a set of those—he would have made a pair of Kings and Jacks. A strong hand. Much stronger than mine.

Their anticipation is almost fun. It makes me laugh. I turn over my cards and toss them on the table in all their magnificent misery.

A pair of threes is a shitty hand.

"You had a pair of threes?!" Grigory exclaims immediately. "Damn, you folded a king and a queen last round, and now you beat me with a pair of threes?!"

I can't help but smile at the absurdity as I take all his chips. Yes, Grigory, you lost to the IT nerd.

The other capos start laughing. Not at me.

"He beat you with nothing!" Marco cackles. "What the hell was that bluff, Grigory? He doesn't even know how to play!"

"Did you see his hand? A pair of threes! I had a King and a Jack!"

The whole room explodes in laughter. It's chaos.

"That was a disgrace, Grigory," Ruslan says.

"It was beginner's luck, dammit!" Grigory insists, his face red.

"Bet again, let's see if it was luck," I say.

Grigory stares at me, furious. He wants to punch me. I wish he could.

It's only at this moment that I notice the air in the room has changed. There's a presence. A weight.

Dante.

He's leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed, in the shadows. His gaze moves from Grigory's red face to my stack of chips. And then to me.

The anger I saw in Dante before, the fury he felt because I had exposed myself to Svetlana, all of that is here. But now it's different. It's possessive. He's watching his toy playing with other people.

That's why Grigory was so nervous. He didn't want to lose to the IT kid, of course, but he didn't want to lose to anyone in front of Dante. He couldn't, not in front of the boss.

Excitement rushes through my body. His perception is more important than any stack of chips.

I don't change my strategy. I keep bluffing with shitty hands, reading their tells, and betting high. With each round, the pile of chips in front of me grows.

Marco, with his neck scar, is sweating. He scratches his chin so hard his skin is turning red. Grigory curses at me with every hand he loses. Ruslan has pulled the knife from his waistband to spin it in his fingers as a nervous tic.

They look at me, searching for a clue, a hesitation, anything.

I win a round with a pair of twos.

"What the hell, kid?" Grigory shouts, throwing his cards in anger. "You don't have fucking anything! Again!"

I shrug. "What a shame."

I keep winning. The laughter and conversation cease, replaced by a tense silence. They stared at me before with veiled contempt, but now the pile of chips in front of me is ridiculous, and there's nothing left to explain it other than the IT kid being better than them at a game of bluff and intimidation. The perks of not giving a shit, I guess; I have all the chips. They have nothing left to bet.

I stretch my arms and push the pile of chips to the center of the table.

"You can have them," I say. "I was just bored."

The chips scatter like a pile of trash. The capos look at me, dumbfounded. They don't understand that I don't care about money.

I turn to leave the room, and I feel Dante's gaze on my back. A burning, possessive look that I crave. Satisfaction is my fuel, and I hope he enjoyed the show.

That's when I hear his voice. Low. Hoarse. A sound that makes me want to kneel.

"Nyx. My office. Now."

I turn to him. The smirk that escapes does nothing to hide my excitement. "Am I in trouble?"

He doesn't move. His eyes kill me with their heat.

"Now."

I nod. The apathy disappears. *Finally*.

I follow Luca out of the room, and I know all the capos are watching us.

The last thing I hear is Marco's whisper, "He's in trouble."

I smile. No, I'm not. I'm *exactly* where I want to be.

LUCA ABANDONS ME AT THE DOOR. HE LETS DANTE WALK IN BEHIND ME, and I hear the door close and click shut.

We're alone.

Dante's office is what you'd expect of him—a large room in shades of wood and black, with an ebony desk and a genuine leather armchair. Like the game room, this place also smells of tobacco, but the scent is richer,

more intense. I see bottles of smoky and spicy whiskeys, lowball glasses, and an ashtray with cigarette butts.

I turn to face him. He scrutinizes me with his chin raised and his arms crossed. He's much taller than me, and it makes him look even more superior.

Honestly, I'd let him fuck my mouth in front of those capos if he ordered me to kneel with that look.

"You're an arrogant little shit," he says. "What did you think you were doing?" He's not as aggressive as I'd like—but the thing that scared him last time is still there: a strange, intrusive softness that only appears between the lines, and which sends a rocket of heat to my groin.

"I was bored," I say. It's the truth.

He narrows his eyes. Then he approaches, and that's all it takes for me to get the good dose of adrenaline I've been looking for for days.

He holds my chin. He forces me to look him in the eyes, and his thumb slides over my bottom lip—his skin against my lips is reverent. I revere him.

"Tell me what you think I'm going to do to you."

He wants to hear it. He wants to hear it from my mouth that he has power over me, and damn, I would tell him every detail of every one of my fantasies if he wanted to.

"You're going to put me in my place," I say softly, and my heart is already racing, spreading oxytocin through all my nerves.

"And where is that?" he says, unyielding. I hold my breath to keep from moaning.

"Below you."

He pushes me back. My lower back hits the desk, and I can't help but groan—it would probably leave another mark, another purple stain. He comes closer. The same hand that was touching my mouth now grabs my neck, squeezing the sides, feeling my heart rate against his fingers. The world contracts into a thick fog. All I feel is his touch.

"Below me," he says, "is exactly where you belong."

His hand, with the same aggression as before, grabs my hair and pulls me into a kiss. It's an open-mouthed, messy, deep kiss. His tongue wraps around mine, and he devours my mouth, sliding his hands over my body, squeezing my waist, and pulling me against him.

His mouth glides to my jaw, where I feel the bruises throbbing. I shiver.

"I can't stop thinking about you," he growls, his voice hoarse and his mouth on my skin. His tone is more threatening than anything he has ever said to me. "Every fucking minute, I think about you and your mouth."

He goes down further. "And those sounds you make..." He nips at my neck, sliding his lips to where he was squeezing a second ago. "They drive me fucking crazy."

I'm used to—and always waiting for—being so desperate for him; having him push me to my limit and make me beg, but he's never kissed me like this. Never kissed my neck, never spread marks on it, never confessed that he thinks about me. Imagining it makes me throb. Imagining that he thinks about me when he's alone, about my mouth. The fantasy flashes in my head; his voice calling my name, imagining my mouth around his cock.

"Fuck, mister," I say. It's almost a whisper—I have no breath. Not with him touching me like this. "You can't say those things..."

His hands firm on my hips, and he lifts me, pressing himself against me to sit me on the edge of the desk. He fits himself between my legs, his body brushing against my erection. It throbs.

"I can say whatever the fuck I want, Nyx," he growls against my mouth before kissing me again, biting my lips.

His hands move down from my hips to my pants. He unbuttons them quickly, pulling them down. I lift my hips, allowing him to take them off.

Having him fully clothed between my naked legs is a sight I've fantasized about more than I'd like to admit.

He pushes me back, forcing me to lie on the desk, disorganizing a pile of contract papers. I don't care. I want this desk to be a mess.

He holds my thighs and spreads my legs even further. I can't contain my groan.

"You're a mess," he murmurs.

"I can't help it, mister. You turn me on."

He laughs, low and rough, and it makes me shiver.

"Yeah, Nyx. I turn you on. And I like seeing you fall apart for me."

His hand slides down my thigh, between my legs. I flinch. Fuck. It was always quick, hateful, with a need that bordered on disgust, and now he holds me like this.

"Fuck, mister, please..."

He lowers his hand to his pants, undoing the buckle. Yes. He pulls his cock out—hard and thick, hot and pulsing. He doesn't wait; he presses the

tip before penetrating me slowly, filling me inch by inch. It hurts—he didn't prepare me, and I've never put anything inside me—and it makes me feel alive.

"Mister, you're big," I breathe.

He grunts, pulling me closer by the thighs. "You're fucking tight."

He moves. How much I've fantasized about this is ridiculous—I want him to fuck me fast, deep, and I want it to hurt.

Each thrust sends a wave of pleasure through my body. I grab the edges of the desk, feeling his cock buried deep inside me. I groan. Too loud for such thin walls.

"Shut the fuck up," he orders. He leans over me and says, in that low, threatening tone I love, "Behind that door, there's a room full of capos. Do you think they won't notice you screaming for me to fuck you?"

I flinch. I like the idea of them hearing me—and he definitely felt it.

He gives another thrust, even deeper.

"What's wrong, Nyx? Do you *want* them to hear you begging me to fuck you harder?"

Yes. I do. But I revere him. I do whatever he wants me to do.

I bite my own hand hard, digging my teeth into the skin of my palm. The pain is familiar—I associate it with him, with his touch. I like it. He grunts as my body contracts around him.

"Fuck, Nyx," he murmurs. "You really like pain, don't you...?"

Each thrust hits my prostate. The metallic taste of blood begins to fill my mouth, and it only makes me harder. I feel the blood run down my mouth, falling down my neck, soaking my collar.

The pressure increases. I bite harder, and the skin has already given way, the cut is deep.

"Come for me, Nyx," he growls with how much I can contract for him. "Come for me, you little slut."

The insult is what makes me come.

My mind goes blank, and the only thing that matters is the sensation of him moving inside me. I contract around him, and he grunts with pleasure, exploding in me in a wave of pure ecstasy.

The pleasure is so intense that I feel empty.

It takes a while for me to get my bearings again. I'm not breathing properly, and the burning in my palm, when I stop biting it, still intensifies.

I watch the blood run, the involuntary tremor of my hand, and he stays, too, until he catches his breath.

He's the first to move. He pulls back, sliding out of me, and shoves himself back into his pants.

I don't move. I watch him. It's a sight worthy of worship. He, fully dressed and composed, while I am a bloody, panting mess on his desk.

He walks silently to the side table in the office. He grabs one of those smoky whiskeys and pours it slowly into one of the crystal glasses.

"I hate you," he says suddenly. "I hate what you do to me."

I smile. I don't get up from the desk. "What do I do to you, mister?"

"This." He doesn't need to elaborate. This, the mess on top of his desk. He picks up the glass of whiskey and turns to me, with a stillness that is difficult to find on his face. "I can't think straight when you're around."

"What do you think about, mister?"

He stares at me with hatred. I love it.

"You know what I think about."

"No, I don't," I provoke. "Tell me."

He barely drinks the whiskey—he abandons the glass on the table where he got it, and comes closer to me. He leans in. Grabs my chin, not caring about the blood, and forces me closer, his face inches away from mine. "I think about fucking that smart mouth of yours, Leonel. That should shut you up."

He lets me go with a sharp push.

I exhale.

Leonel. It's the first time he's called me that.

I sit up on the desk. This is a kind of intimacy I never imagined he would give me.

He goes back to the side table, to the glass of whiskey. He swirls the liquid and doesn't drink it.

"Come here," he says softly. It's an order.

I get up from the desk. I grab my clothes—the discarded pants—but don't put them on yet. I want him to see what he did to me.

I steady myself with how much my legs are shaking before approaching him.

He takes my wrist, carefully. Too carefully, which doesn't suit him and sends a strange itch down my spine. He turns my palm up and examines the

cut. There's a reddish circle, outlined by several deep, dotted cuts. There's still fresh blood between them.

He sighs. He raises the glass of whiskey, the golden liquid swaying, and for a second, I think he's going to give me a drink.

Instead, he pours it on my hand.

I close my eyes. I try to pull my attention from the cut in an impulse, and I bite my lower lip to keep from making a sound as the pain explodes in my hand. It stings, and the burning spreads throughout my arm. It's hell. And I love it. I force myself to stay still, to keep my body from contracting and making any kind of sound other than a gasp. Only the tremor remains.

Dante sees my struggle. How I try not to moan with pleasure. At a certain point, he recognizes it.

"You liked that, didn't you?" he says softly. There's a hint of disapproval.

Sweat runs down my forehead. The whiskey cleans the blood flow and disinfects the cut—the pain is excruciating, but his perception of me is more important.

He doesn't let go of my wrist as he leans over, getting a pristine cloth from inside a desk drawer after abandoning the now-empty crystal glass. He presses it against my palm, holds it there for a few seconds, and wipes away the traces of blood.

"Why did you do that?" he says, firmly.

I didn't need to bite so hard to hold myself back. Anyone else wouldn't do that, wouldn't turn their own skin into a cluster of cuts.

But the veiled accusation turns me on. *You hurt yourself for me.* It makes me want to kiss him.

"I told you that you turn me on," I say.

He lets me go with a hint of disgust. "Stop that shit. Only *I* get to hurt you."

I smile. I'd like that, too.

"Is this a long-term promise?" I say. I don't ask for permission to grab some tissues from the corner of the cellar to clean myself up as best I can.

Dante frowns. "What?"

"My medical leave is ending. And I don't know what the plan is. Do I go back to the office on Monday? Are you going to keep me here forever?" I run the tissues over my abdomen and thighs, but it doesn't save me from the sticky feeling. I need a shower. "Because if I go back, your monopoly on

my suffering ends," I continue on autopilot. "I'll have to split my time between you and the pure agony of listening to my boss explain a *for* loop."

I know I'm playing with fire.

A controlled fury takes over Dante's features at the mention of an entire world where I exist, and that he doesn't control.

He didn't like that.

I'd like a straight answer about what's going to happen, but I imagine the choice between keeping me locked up here and returning me to that asshole Chad isn't entirely up to him—he's not the only Volkov—and this pisses him off.

"You're still on your sick leave," he clearly forces himself to repeat. He's stating a fact he hates.

I get dressed in silence. He watches me.

"Get out," he orders.

I adjust my wrinkled clothes. My shirt is ruined, its collar stained with red blood, and my hand is still throbbing.

He doesn't answer my question. *What's going to happen*. He just drowns in silence in a stormy cloud of hatred; all the rage that wasn't in him before is now here. I'd let him empty it all into me. Hurt me.

I dodge the small dark stains on the carpet—my own blood and spilled whiskey—and walk to the door.

I glance at him over my shoulder. Leaning against the side table, he takes a cigarette from a box thrown in the corner of the cellar—Dunhill, I gather—, and he doesn't look at me anymore.

I open the door. I leave the office slowly, walking toward Luca, who waits for me at the end of the hall.

He looks at me with something that borders on sympathy and guilt. The blood. He thinks Dante beat the hell out of me in there, all for humiliating his capos under Luca's watch.

I don't clarify.

He takes me back to my room without a word.

MY BODY IS MORE MARKED THAN IT HAS EVER BEEN. THERE'S A GREENISH blemish on my lower back, purplish marks on my waist and thighs, and

bruises—hickeys—scattered across my neck and collarbone. They are *his* signatures. I can't help but like them.

After my shower, I get a gauze pad and bandages from a first-aid kit in the medicine cabinet. I don't want anyone to ask me about a bite mark on my hand, so I wrap a few layers of gauze with the bandages around my palm. I find it difficult to do with only one available.

I secure the bandages with a random knot that I tie half with my mouth and half with my hand.

I leave the bathroom, drying my hair with a towel, and hear a knock on the door. A gentle sound, unlike Luca's authoritative ones.

It's Svetlana.

"*Leo?*" she asks from behind the door. "*May I come in?*"

Once again, Svetlana shows up at my door after Dante has fucked some part of my body. At least this time she gave a warning before entering.

"One second," I exclaim, putting on the first pair of sweatpants I see and looking for any turtleneck to hide the hickeys.

Dressed, I open the door.

Her perfectly cut suit, straight hair, and harmonious makeup make her as impeccable as ever.

The first thing she does is examine me with her emerald eyes, raking over my skin as if searching for fresh wounds and new scars.

She stares at my bandaged hand before saying, "The report."

I go to the computer desk, grabbing the flash drive I kept in the drawer. "I've completed 50% of the work."

She takes it from my hand, arching one of her thin, defined eyebrows.

"Efficient," she says, satisfied. "And what did you find?"

"Nothing that will break your financial market. The strangest thing was the head of security accessing *furry* porn during work hours."

She looks disgusted. "Porn of what?"

"*Furry*. It's a subculture..."

"I don't want to know," she interrupts me. "Anything else?"

"I also found a small anomaly in a payment diversion. It's not a big one, but I imagined it could be a test from you, so it's detailed there. One of your capos paid nine thousand instead of ten to an employee. He kept a thousand for himself."

"Right," she says. If she was surprised by the diversion, she didn't show it. She puts the flash drive in her blazer, and her eyes return to examining

me. She glances at my neck, noticing the slightly loose turtleneck, and I'm sure she's seeing the marks Dante left.

"What's the plan for Monday?" I say. I hope that, if Dante didn't give me any answers, at least she can provide some.

"That will depend on what I think of your report. And on *Dante*."

She shows *this*. A stagnant, tired disgust—*Dante*. Considering the respect with which she spoke about him last time, I imagine they are on bad terms now. Because of me, for sure.

She turns to the door. "We'll inform you tomorrow."

Svetlana appears to be the kind of person who plans ahead and resolves issues well before deadlines. Dante, on the other hand, has a difficult temperament—he must be turning the whole monotonous routine she exudes into a personal hell.

"Yes, ma'am."

I watch her heels click down the hall before closing myself in the room again.

THE NEXT MORNING IS A SILENT INSULT.

There's no Dante. No screams, no threats, no blood-laced stolen kisses. There's just Luca knocking on my door, holding an ironed suit and polished shoes I'd never wear in my life.

"Mr. Volkov has decided you'll return to your normal activities," he says. He leaves the clothes hanging on the doorknob and walks away.

I thought Dante would go to greater lengths for me. It's disappointing.

"Is that all?" I ask, and Luca just nods.

"A car will take you to work."

The lack of fanfare is the strangest part. No last threat, no final possessive touch. Just a cold order, delivered by an intermediary.

I put on the suit. It's expensive, made of a fabric I've never felt on my skin, and it feels like a costume; a disguise of normalcy that no longer belongs to me—I barely recognize myself in the mirror. The bandage on my hand is a reminder of it.

Luca escorts me to the front of the mansion. The waiting car isn't luxurious enough to attract unwanted attention, but it's far more than I'd

ever need. The driver is a large man in a suit, and another enforcer takes the seat beside him; people I've never seen, who drive me in silence. I say nothing.

Facing my destination building, I barely recognize myself in the reflection of the glass doors. The clothes *look* like something I would wear, but they don't *feel* like it—too ironed, too polished, too expensive. I usually come to work in wrinkled dress pants and old shoes, never really caring what to wear or how I look. The state of my hair, my barely healed face, is unsettling against the normal appearance those selected clothes exude.

I walk in. Brenda greets me with a nervous smile, glued to the computer on her desk. Not my problem. I walk past her, and the turnstile camera recognizes me this time. My face is still bruised, but at least it's no longer swollen.

I step into the elevator. I press the button, look at the closed doors, and then my gaze drifts to the floor. My own reflection bothers me. I'll have to ask them to bring me my own clothes.

When I step out of the elevator on my floor, I catch the familiar aroma of the citrus essential oil Nicole drops into the humidifier every morning. I always take the same glazed-over path to my cubicle, avoiding anyone I can. But this time, something beyond the citrus scent bothers me in the air. The suppressed desperation of a swarm of average workers has been replaced by a frantic tension.

Brenda's nervousness extends to the entire IT team. Employees check their emails with a nervous energy that makes their hands tremble on the mouse, struggling to click the 'x' on open windows. Some are on their personal phones, others peek into Chad's office with restless legs, waiting for some important announcement, and others—most alarmingly—are gathered in small huddles, whispering amongst themselves. IT staff aren't usually that social.

Something is off.

Cardboard boxes are scattered across the gray carpet, haphazardly stacked like headstones of a failed startup. Some are open, revealing the pathetic contents of an office life: mugs with motivational quotes, family photos in frames, staplers.

I walk past a group. Nobody notices me.

"…they said the restructuring was to optimize…"

"…they're firing everyone in marketing…"

Honestly, I don't care about marketing. The comments pass me by like some strange, isolated event. Then I see them—at the door of Chad's office, there's Nicole, biting her nails with a furrowed brow, and next to her, the manager himself, with his disheveled comb-over, gesticulating non-stop.

He sees me. His face lights up with misplaced relief.

"Leo! You're back! Thank God!" he says, approaching with open arms. I dodge any attempt at an embrace. "You won't believe what happened!"

I look at the boxes, at the terrified faces, at the mess.

"What happened?" I ask.

"It's the end of the world, Leo!" Chad wails, grabbing my shoulders with a strength his flabby arms shouldn't have. "A disaster! A corporate apocalypse!"

I look at his hand on my shoulder. Why the hell is he touching me? He doesn't seem to notice.

Before I can tell him to let go, Nicole approaches. She has smudges of smeared mascara under her eyes. "Leo! Accounting! All of them!" she says, pointing to a corner of the floor where more cardboard boxes accumulated. "They just got an email! Contract termination! Security is already waiting at the door to escort them out."

Chad releases me to run his hands through his hair, making his comb-over even worse. "It's not just Accounting—Sales too! We've been *bought*, Leo. Out of nowhere. The company was sold."

So that's it. An acquisition. The capitalist life cycle; bigger fish eating smaller ones.

I almost yawn. If they get rid of the IT sector and the Volkovs release me to a facade of normalcy, I'll have to find another hole to slowly waste away in—I need at least one source of legitimate income that doesn't involve working for the mafia. Thinking about the possibilities drains my energy. Looking for a job opening. Updating my resume. Going to job interviews, telling the interviewer they should hire me so I don't get arrested and that I see myself in a grave in five years.

"They're firing everyone," Nicole continues. "No one knows who's next. Brenda from reception said the new owners are ruthless."

Chad then turns to me. The expression on his face is one of such absurd expectation it's comical. He looks at me as if I were a prophet, a general about to draw up the battle plan that will save everyone.

"Leo, my champ," he says softly. "You're calm. You're the smartest guy in IT. What do we do? What's the play? There has to be a way to get around this, a plan…"

I stare at him. Does he expect me to type a line of code that will reverse a multibillion-dollar acquisition? His stupidity is almost an art form. He genuinely believes that because I can fix the printer when it's unplugged, I can stop a corporate restructuring.

His pathetic hope is the most depressing thing I've seen today. And that includes the cardboard boxes.

I look at Chad's pleading face, at Nicole's panic, and shrug.

"Update your resume, I guess."

The hope on his face wilts. "What? But… you're our ace! Our genius!"

I turn, looking for my cubicle.

"Where's my fern?"

The question is so out of place amidst the panic that Nicole blinks, confused. "Your fern? It's in my cubicle. I watered it while you were sick."

"We're talking about the end of our careers and you're worried about a plant?!" Chad says.

I ignore him. Good to know it's alive. I peek into Nicole's cubicle and see the tips of its little leaves.

"Who are the new owners?" I ask. I don't care, but data is data.

"No one knows," Nicole whispers, as if a ghost were our mysterious buyer. "We only know the name of the holding company that made the purchase. It was in the internal memo HR sent before the email system crashed. That foreign holding… I think V-Corp or something."

Wait.

V-Corp.

V.

Volkov?

The apathy shatters, and the fog of boredom dissipates instantly. It can't be. The audacity. The *scale* of it.

My posture changes. My shoulders straighten. Chad and Nicole continue to babble, but the sound of their voices becomes background noise.

I brush past Chad with a shove.

"Hey! Where are you going? What about our plan?" he shouts behind me.

I need to check this.

I walk to my cubicle. My chair. My computer. I don't sit down, just drag the keyboard closer and start typing. The operating system is slow, archaic, but it's a terrain I know.

First, the basics. The terminal. I check the list of background processes, looking for any unknown or suspicious services consuming resources.

Nothing.

Network connections. A command to list all open ports and the IP addresses the computer is sending and receiving data from. I analyze the list. Standard corporate traffic, internal servers, the network printer…

And a persistent, encrypted connection to an IP address that doesn't belong to our infrastructure.

It's subtle, buried under layers of legitimate traffic, disguised as a system synchronization process. A professional job. Sal's work, no doubt, under very specific orders.

The confirmation.

They didn't just buy the damn company; they're monitoring what I do on the company computer.

I analyze the kernel drivers. A keylogger. A screen recorder. A complete surveillance package, so deeply embedded in the system that it would be invisible to anyone who didn't know exactly what to look for, recording every keystroke, every mouse movement, every open window.

I abandon the keyboard. The plastic slides from my fingertips, and the hum of the office, the panic of my colleagues, everything disappears.

They bought the building. They bought my boss. They bought my routine—my *cage*. And they put a camera in every corner to watch me rattle the bars.

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SIXTEEN

DANTE

I WANT HIM AGAIN. Fuck it.

The image of him at my desk is an addiction. And the idea of him returning to that mediocre life, to that office, is a *waste*. A waste of that intelligent mouth, that sick mind that only truly comes alive when kneeling for me. I can't stand the thought of seeing him working for someone lesser, answering ridiculous orders, being touched by hands that don't even have the imagination to hurt him properly.

I watched him disappear under Luca's watch after what we did, obeying as if he were just another common employee. A poorly rehearsed charade. I wanted to tear him to shreds instead of letting him go.

I hate it. I hate how he offers me absolute control and, at the same time, steals it from me. It's a masterfucking trick, and I fall for it every time.

That night, after sending Nyx back to his room, I found my capos talking in low voices in the game room. They didn't leave early—they stayed for hours smoking and trying to understand what had happened.

"I've never seen anything like it," Grigory grumbled. "He cleaned the table with several unplayable hands."

"It's *his mind*," Ruslan said, tapping a finger against his temple. "The kid was playing us."

Marco, the scar on his neck twisting as he spoke, nodded. "That's why the boss got that way when he brought him to the warehouse," he muttered,

glancing around as if Nyx could hear him. "He's a monster. A guy who plays poker like that… you can't just leave him unleashed."

That's when Svetlana walked into the room.

She had been furious since our last argument. She thought I was becoming my father, even with all the clues about how far from normal Nyx was.

"Grigory, Marco, Ruslan. Out," she ordered, without even looking at them.

The three immediately stood up, muttering goodbyes and hurrying out. They knew they shouldn't stick around for a fight between the Volkovs.

"What do you want, Svetlana?" I asked.

"The decision about our asset," she got straight to the point, crossing her arms. "I compared his report with our experts'. It's impeccable. He even caught a thousand-dollar diversion one of Dmitry's capos made. The plan remains exactly as it was; we'll let him return to work on Monday. Maintaining the facade of normalcy is crucial. We monitor him, both digitally and physically, and if he shows any sign of instability or tries anything, we act—perhaps by buying the company he works for to exert more precise control."

Svetlana's plans are always methodical and controlled. They always work, but in this case, it was a bad plan.

"You just heard what they said, Svetlana."

"I heard three men scared because they lost at poker to a kid," she retorted.

"No. You heard three of my most experienced men, men who deal with violence and betrayal every day, admitting they were *outmaneuvered* by him. He's too smart to be left unsupervised, even for a second."

She raised an eyebrow. "We *will* be supervising him."

"Not enough! We have no way to control him, so we should buy his entire company first to control the *environment* around him. We cut out all variables."

Svetlana was tired of arguing with me, I knew. And, to hell with it, the logic was sound. Such a volatile and powerful asset shouldn't have the freedom to get bored.

She sighed in surrender. "Alright, Dante. Have it your way. Buy the company." She paused, and her tone of voice changed, becoming lower, sharper. "But I want something made perfectly clear. Your ‘specific

approaches' end where his value to this family begins. He's a kid, Dante. What is he, early twenties? Almost fifteen years younger than you."

The mention of his age, said like that, sounded like an accusation. One I didn't know how to refute.

"And, frankly," she continued, "of all your distractions over the years, of all the models and heiresses you've paraded around, this is, by far, the most *unexpected*."

The insinuation was clear. She categorized me, putting me back into a box she understood. The box of Dante who liked tall, blonde, predictable women. And Nyx… he didn't fit into any box.

I never stopped to analyze my own hunger. It was always simple.

Until him.

"Just try to ensure your control doesn't leave such *intimate marks* visible on him."

She wasn't just accusing me of brutality. The accusation was uglier, more intimate. Her logic was perfect and, for that reason, wrong. She saw a simple scenario: a violent mafia boss forcing a young captive hacker to submit.

And how, in hell's name, could I defend myself? How could I say, "he likes it, he begs for it" without sounding like the worst kind of asshole? How to explain that his moans weren't from fear, but from a pleasure so deep it scared me? The truth was a thousand times sicker and *impossible* to explain than the lie she constructed in her mind. Every attempt at defense would only sink me deeper into the image of the monster she painted. A monster I fought every day not to be.

"You know nothing," I said. I took a step toward her, and for the first time in years, I saw caution in how she looked at me. "What I do with him has nothing to do with his age or my past partners."

"Doesn't it?" she challenged. "Then tell me what it is, Dante. Because from *my* perspective, an asset who cooperates out of fear of what else the boss might do to him in the privacy of a locked room is a risk I'm not willing to take."

A laugh escaped me. A dry, humorless sound that made even Svetlana blink. *Fear*. The word was so inadequate, so *absurdly* out of place it was comical. My mind projected his images: Nyx in the warehouse, provoking me even after I threatened him; Nyx on his knees in his apartment asking

me to make him a *punching bag*; Nyx at the poker table, smiling as he humiliated my most dangerous men.

"Svetlana, *fear*? You think the problem here is that he's *afraid* of me?"

Nyx didn't know what fear was. He fed on it. He used it as fuel. The idea of him being afraid of me was the biggest joke I'd ever heard.

"I pointed a gun at his head. Cocked. An inch from his forehead," I said, and as the words came out, I was back in that dusty apartment. "And he *smiled*. Are you hearing me? He *smiled* at me as if I was offering him a fucking gift."

I could still feel the weight of the pistol in my hand, the smell of old coffee and dust from that poorly kept apartment. It was a logical end. The pest that was Nyx needed to be eradicated. It was the clean solution, the rational way out to silence the obsession he had created. I wanted to solve the problem in the only way I knew.

And then he looked at me. And that bastard *smiled*. A *welcoming* smile. He *desired* death from *my* hands.

I didn't explain any of this to Svetlana. How could I?

"He doesn't operate by the same logic as us," I continued. That was as much as I could allow myself to say. "You talk about fear as if it were a tool I could use, but you don't understand… with him, everything is inverted."

Svetlana processed the information. Her face showed no relief or understanding. On the contrary, her expression became even harder, more clinical.

"That doesn't reassure me, Dante. It only proves you're losing perspective."

"I'm not losing perspective! I'm the only one who *has* the fucking perspective!" I insisted. "I'm the only one who's seen what he's capable of! That's why he can't have a *millimeter* of freedom!"

"And that's why you're making an *emotional* decision, not a strategic one."

She cornered me again. Every attempt to explain his madness only made me sound crazier.

I clenched my fists. "You don't have to understand. You just have to trust that I *know* what I'm doing."

"For the first time, Dante, I don't think you do."

She didn't think I was dealing with a security problem. She thought I was dealing with a *personal* problem, an obsession that could cost the

family dearly.

Perhaps she wasn't wrong.

I ordered the acquisition of the company right after that conversation. We offered double what it was actually worth, and there was no negotiation beyond an enthusiastic acceptance of the best possible offer they could ever hope to receive.

Victory was supposed to taste better.

I spent the next day in my office. The acquisition was finalized before lunch. Every second of his mundane life now passed through a Volkov filter—the surveillance on his terminal was set up before he even arrived for work.

I had prepared myself for his reaction. If he got angry, if he tried to retaliate with one of his ridiculous pranks, we had reinforced all our systems while he was working on Svetlana's list. I have no doubt he could still tear down our defenses, but not without delaying him long enough for me to put him in his place before any real damage was done.

A pull of his hair worked miracles. Who knew what else would.

But no.

The secure phone rings late in the afternoon. One of the lookouts assigned to follow him—Dmitry had insisted an entire task force for a 23-year-old kid was overkill, but just like Svetlana, his view of the situation was colored by naivety.

I answer without a word. The first thing I hear is, "He's left the building, boss."

I check the clock—six in the evening. His clock-out time. Throughout his entire workday, he had worked like a civilian. Part of me expected him to refuse to be planted in front of a computer while being watched, but that's exactly what he did.

He showed nothing. And that had irritated me long before this call.

"Where is he going?" I ask, straightening in my chair. I drop the files I was reviewing—I can't even concentrate on them.

"Stopped at a convenience store on the corner."

This has to be it. The retaliation. What is he doing? Buying a burner phone? Making a secret contact?

I wait for the next step, one carefully woven to get inside my head and destroy everything within. I expect more of the same behavior that led him to put a ridiculous song on a loop, blasting from every Volkov speaker.

"What is he buying?"

"Uh... cigarettes, boss."

Cigarettes.

I frown. The kid lived on frozen food and energy drinks; cigarettes weren't part of the profile I had forced myself to read after Svetlana's jab about his name, and during his entire time here, he never once put a cigarette to his lips.

"Cigarettes?"

"Yes, boss. He paid and he's leaving."

"Follow him."

I wait, motionless.

"He's getting in the car, sir."

Fuck.

I hang up. He did nothing but buy cigarettes he doesn't smoke before deliberately getting into the car that would bring him back to me with no detours. As if it were normal, as if this level of control was part of his routine. Is he going to start smoking now? Is that the act of rebellion I've been waiting for?

I'd like to say he was just a passing thought and that, after checking on him, I could get back to work. But this son of a bitch has taken root in me, so instead of resuming my life, I wait for him. I wait for the report, for anything that tells me he isn't simply accepting our move. This doesn't feel right, it feels suspicious, and Nyx has always done what he could to make his protests heard. I'm sure he'll do it now.

The car arrives. My security guards escort him into the mansion, and I follow every movement on the cameras. I see him stop in the middle of the hallway and talk to my men, gesturing.

Then I get a call from security telling me he wants to see me.

A part of me—a part I hate—likes this. This is what I expect: anger, humiliation; attempts to bargain. I want to know what he's going to do, if he'll find some sort of private revenge by blowing smoke at me and accusing me of killing him slowly. If he'll tell me how humiliating it was to face his coworkers knowing he was the cause of the corporate restructuring, or if he'll show a remnant of the real Nyx I know.

So I say, "Send him in."

He passes from camera to camera—hallway to hallway—until he reaches my office door.

His escort knocks on the door for him. He opens it without waiting for permission. Typical. I cross my arms, leaning against my desk, and he emerges through the opening.

It's strange seeing him in person now in formal clothes. Nyx is anything but formal. The image of an average office employee still feels like a fever dream.

He steps inside. I signal for the guard to leave us alone.

I wait for him to clarify what he wants. I search for signs of anger, signs that he hates me now. He remains neutral. If anything is different, it's the opposite of my expectations—Nyx's face is light today. His eyes are always stormy, his features always sharp—today his eyes are clear, his lines soft. Strange. He approaches me. He slips a hand inside his blazer pocket and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. Newly bought. He extends it to me. It's still wrapped in clear plastic.

"You bought my company, so I thought I'd buy something for you in return," he finally says. "Although a pack of cigarettes isn't very impressive."

I stare at the pack. Red and gold. Dunhill. The brand I usually smoke.

A lot happens in my head. He pays enough attention to me to know which brand of cigarettes I smoke. He's not angry, doesn't seem angry.

And his words take a moment to make sense.

Impressive? That's his conclusion?

I take the pack on impulse and force my voice to scrape its way up my throat. "Why the hell are you happy? We did this to control you."

His smile widens. It's the most insane and genuine thing I've ever seen.

"Yes," he says. "I almost got hard in public when I found out."

His reaction doesn't fit in any scenario I imagined. It doesn't make any sense. The image of this Nyx smiling happily in a corporate setting, happy to know his movements were being controlled by an army of goons and cameras, is ridiculous, incomprehensible. It's an impossibility—he takes every weapon I point at him and turns it into an offering. And it makes me want to throw him against the wall until that smile fades.

It makes me want to touch him.

My fingers tighten on the pack, crinkling the plastic. "You're fucking crazy."

He laughs. And, damn, that laugh is even worse. The sound of what he is—a man with no concept of danger.

"For you?" he says. "Absolutely."

No, Svetlana. You have no fucking idea.

His hand slides up the front of my shirt, and his eyes fall to half-mast as he toys with one of the buttons. His tongue peeks between his lips, tracing them, wetting them. It's such a small gesture, yet it makes me think of a million *disgusting* things at once.

I leave the pack on my desk to grab him by the throat. I need to know if he's real. I need to know that his insanity hasn't crossed a line *I* didn't draw, that it isn't something beyond my control.

That my hold over him still works.

"I control you now," I remind him, pressing hard enough to feel his heartbeat hammering beneath my palm. His breath quickens. And his smile disappears. He stares at me as if my words are sweet. "Completely."

He sighs. Delighted. "Do you know how fucking good that sounds?" he whispers. "Fuck me up. Do what you want. You bought me."

The words make me dizzy. I press harder. His face starts to flush. His eyes, dark and fixed on me, turn pleading. His hands lift, and he touches me, curling his fingers on my sleeves, sliding down to my arms, trying to pull me closer.

He would let me do anything. He would let me break him. He would let me *end* him. And he would thank me for it.

With a curse, I let go.

I'm pushing us back to the beginning again. To Nyx burrowing into my head, pulling me to the edge of an abyss of violence I can't face right now.

I won't let him do that again.

"Get out," I order.

He touches where my fingers had been—the red mark forming on his neck. Svetlana was right; the turtleneck underneath his dress shirt doesn't hide all the marks. The outline of my fingers in red bleeds out from above the wool collar, on top of bruises I remember too well causing.

Nyx takes a moment to move. He stares at me with that strange, fucked-up affection, his face flushed like a little girl's. This has no place here. Not for me.

He turns. He makes his way with slow steps, touches the doorknob, and hesitates.

He tightens his fingers on the metal.

"Mister," he calls. I clench a fist. I force myself to tense my shoulders, ready to remind him he's not in a position to question me. I expect him to say something depraved, something that makes me question if I should *really* throw him out, like he's done more than once before. I expect more of the same.

He turns his face, but doesn't look at me. He's still got his back to me, facing the door, and I see him open his mouth, hesitating.

He goes quiet. He thinks.

I'm about to rush him when he says, "I think I'm falling in love with you."

My chest tightens. Nyx always sucked the oxygen out of every room he deigned to be in, but this is different.

He peeks at my reaction over his shoulder. He gives me one of his out-of-place smiles, devoid of perversions or urges—just *affection*.

Violence is something familiar. At least, despite *everything*, even with *Nyx*, it's something I know.

This isn't.

He opens the door. Calmly, he walks out, pretending he hasn't just fucked up with my entire fucking head.

What the hell does that mean? Nyx *in love*? Love isn't for someone like him, it's not for someone like *us*—nobody *loves* Leonel Hays, nobody *loves* Dante Volkov. I've never heard that before, and I don't *want* to hear it now.

I have no way to claim this because this feeling doesn't belong to me. It never has, and it has never touched the same ground as me. Nyx is a *fetish*. It's perversion and passion and fascination, but not love.

Right?

"Goddammit."

I don't realize when I hurl my best bottle of whiskey at the wall. The glass shatters against the long curtains in front of the windows, the remnants of the drink splatter across the carpet and trickle down the wall.

He doesn't even know me. He doesn't *understand*. He never could. He only has my surface—the face my father molded. I can't play this game with him. It makes no sense.

The cigarette box he gave me still rests on the ebony wood of the table. The brand I like, the same one I've used since I was sixteen.

Why would he be in love with me? Why would he think I *want* any kind of affection?

He shouldn't look at me like that, and I can't do this to him—he scares me too much to even *think* about having anything real with him.

He makes me want everything too much.

I CAN'T FOCUS.

Work is hell. I see my men flinching and telling each other, "the boss is in a bad mood," but they have *no idea* what a bad mood is.

From the first day Nyx burst into my life, he's been lurking in the corners of my mind—he is, undeniably, showing himself more and more. *I can't stop thinking about you,* I had said, and it's true. I can't. But before, I still managed to stay functional. I still buried him when I needed to pay attention, when I needed to dedicate myself to more things beyond the fucked-up depravity he brought.

Now, that doesn't work.

Those ridiculous words are too heavy to simply be buried. They're resonant, hanging in neon lights above any fucking logical thought I might have. I read documents, attend meetings, give managerial orders, and he's there, etched onto my eyelids, spitting cheap sentimentality. *In love.*

Svetlana says something about the lists of people she sent him to sift through—I don't care. The digital rat is the least of my problems; he doesn't cost me as much as Nyx does. She lectures about letting him have real server access, and she thinks I don't see when she exchanges glances with Dmitry, saying I'm not as combative as I usually am. Fuck that. I don't want any more headaches with Svetlana—not while Nyx is bombarding me.

I peek at the cameras. I'm not proud of how many times I do that during the day. Dmitry managed a competent team to monitor Nyx while we let him go back to work, even in a company now controlled by our family. The Volkovs have much more important functions than watching a mundane reality show of an IT kid's life, he said, and I agree.

But I can't trust anything beyond my own eyes with Nyx now.

I track his image. The cameras in his office show an ordinary routine beneath the residual panic of the only department partially surviving the corporate restructuring—an excuse to turn the building into a surveillance field—and I watch him infiltrate normalcy like a parasite. A diligent worker

who finishes his tasks much faster than most, perpetually bored by the simplicity of his responsibilities. I see it in his boredom, in the occasional yawns, in his disinterested eyes.

He keeps his distance from his coworkers. He doesn't exchange words for long with any of them, when he doesn't leave them talking to themselves, and I'd say he's just a tired employee if I didn't know him. Like Svetlana thinks he is—a disillusioned, depressed kid.

I watch the insistence of the girl in the cubicle next to his. I watch him nod at her, offer minimal answers while staring at an office plant pot.

She gets up at some point. She leans next to him and gives him a smile that borders on shyness. His eyes gain some tiny sliver of life when he lifts his head to her, and she smiles. I don't know if she's blushing or if it's makeup—I didn't care enough before to notice, but she comes back with a bigger smile and two cups of coffee, with more color in her cheeks. She leans in. She leaves the extra coffee on his desk, and she puts her hand on his back, and keeps it there.

He doesn't pull away.

In fact, he *smiles* at her. That same easy, small, fucked-up smile he gives me when he kisses me. That smile is *mine*. And he's giving it to her, for *free*, because of a fucking coffee; he's letting her *put her hands* on him for a fucking coffee.

Is this his *counterattack*? To say he loves me, fuck with my head, and smile at just anyone like that?

She points at his bandaged hand. Concern. He lets out a polite laugh that doesn't suit him, and she touches his arm. His hand.

Fuck. He's not going to tell her how he got that injury? I watch him play house with this woman who surely has no idea of the perversion he embraces whenever he looks at me, of the submission with which he kneels.

I break a pen in my hand without noticing. It snaps in half and the ink stains my skin as I watch Nyx's "boss" give him some stupid order while that woman doesn't take her hand off him. Why doesn't he push her away?

The freedom of her touches irritates me. She doesn't have that right, and she doesn't know *who* she's touching. She should go after someone who fits into the grayest mass of civilians managed by whatever that ridiculous boss is.

I pull up the company's employee list. Restructured as an IT integration of another asset, average employees with average resumes. I access her file,

her data, her fucking documents.

Nicole Davis. Twenty-eight years old, white, redhead with brown eyes. Graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in Data Analysis at the end of 2020. Owns a Honda Civic with 28 installments left to pay, her father depends on expensive blood-thinning medication, her brother was caught with marijuana on campus—no criminal record—, her debts are accruing high interest, and her entire salary is drained from her bank account immediately upon deposit. She has no investments, no support network. One late payment and she'd be in the red. An untimely accident and she'd lose the car while still owing the bank. A drug trafficking accusation would ruin her brother's life.

Four close friends at most. Social media is private, with few sepia-filtered sunset photos, selfies, and a stray dog—a simple life, just *anyone*.

I clench my fists before turning off the camera monitors—it's a sacrifice to stop myself from smashing the screens and crushing that fucking image of Nyx smiling at her like he smiles at me.

I know I'll do something irreparable if I keep watching.

I stand up. I let the chair fall, knocking an ashtray off the table.

I wait for six o'clock.

Until I reach it, it's a hell of a lack of focus, and a replay of Nyx looking at that woman. It's my men afraid to speak near me, afraid to die. They see my limit, and they tremble before it. I hear them question each other what happened, and I ignore it.

What *besides* Nyx has been driving me insane lately?

At that time—at six—I allow myself to return to the office. I allow myself to pick up the fallen chair and put it back in its place, I allow myself to turn the monitors back on, and I allow myself to watch Nyx get up from that wheeled chair, pack his few belongings into an old backpack, and walk out.

And I see when she—*Nicole*—waves at him. She approaches, and he opens his mouth. He makes her *laugh*. And she watches him. She watches him walk away like a lovesick teenager, watches him go down the street until he disappears from sight.

I wait. I take my best cigar from the bottom drawers, light it, and it's no surprise it doesn't calm me at all. The lookouts inform me that Nyx gets into the car—no surprise cigarettes today, just a quick drive of a few minutes until he's back here, and I order Luca to bring him to me first thing.

I count the seconds. I feel like breaking someone in half. Fucking Nyx and his strategy—it's always about messing with my head, more and more. The word still weighs somewhere in my mind. *In love.*

I recognize Luca's knock on the door, and I recognize Nyx's insubordination in not waiting for my permission to turn the doorknob. He appears as before—white in his paleness saved by colorful bruises. Now, his eyes are bored, tired, and the remnant of life in them is a poorly disguised curiosity.

I tell Luca to leave us alone. Then it's just the two of us.

"Sit down," I order him.

He approaches slowly. He pulls the armchair in front of my desk closer before sitting down, impassive to the tobacco smoke that permeates me.

I don't expect him to say anything. I haven't *allowed* him to say anything.

"Nicole Davis," I begin. One of his eyebrows slowly disappears under his messy bangs. "A beautiful, kind woman. She made you coffee today." I draw smoke from the cigar, see the tension in his shoulders. He doesn't know what I'm talking about, where I'm going. "Tell me, *Leonel*. What else does she do for you?"

He frowns. His eyes—always almost translucent—dart to the carpet, to the fallen ashtray. He shrugs. "I thought you were more interested in my reports than my office social life."

And this bastard deflects my question.

"You seem close," I say, and the sound of it—Nyx and her close—disgusts me. "This girl, Nicole… twenty-eight years old. Has a hundred thousand dollars in outstanding debt. Her father had two bypass surgeries. Her mother depends on his pension to survive. The house mortgage has a variable interest rate that will be readjusted next quarter… it would be a shame if the bank decided to foreclose due to default."

He slowly understands the threat. His face shifts from mere patched-up curiosity to interest.

"You smiled at her today, *Leonel*," I say. I emphasize his name again. "She touched you—your arm, your back. Harmless gestures." He doesn't show what he thinks. He just looks at me with a strange intensity, and, fuck, I double down. "There will be no more harmless gestures," I state. "With *one* call, I'll fire her. I'll blacklist her name, ensuring she never works in this city again in any area remotely related to technology. I'll destroy her credit.

I'll make sure her loan is foreclosed. So, let's establish some rules. Starting tomorrow, you don't talk to her, unless it's strictly about work. You don't *look* at her. If she says good morning, you ignore her. If she offers you coffee, you pour it down the sink in front of her. And if she touches you again… I'll break every fucking one of her fingers. And then *yours*, for allowing it. Am I clear?"

He needs to understand he's not playing with just anyone. My hatred might have its uncontrolled form, but my control is different—and now, I control his *world*. I need to remind him it's not a good idea to test me. If before he did it for a punch and a hand job, now he understands that, above all, he drags people who have nothing to do with it into the black hole he is.

I don't directly involve those who don't deserve it. It's one of the Volkovs' internal rules. But he makes me want to burn all the lines. If Nyx wants to play with fire, I'll force him to watch everything he even looked at with kindness turn to ashes. And he'll know it's his fault.

He stands up. Slowly. I expect him to challenge me, to explain himself, but he doesn't. He wets his lips in the dirtiest way I've ever seen and gives me a feverish look. I see Nyx blossoming beneath that mundane skin of Leonel Hays.

I don't back down. This is the man I want to talk to.

"So, if I understood correctly…" he says. He approaches my desk, walks around it. "You bought an entire company, installed a state-level surveillance system… and now you're threatening to destroy an innocent woman's life… because I *smiled* at her?"

He gives me a half-smile. I watch him say these words as he gets closer and closer, until he crosses the table separating us and is beside me. My chair turns towards him and I expect him to kneel before me, spitting more of his sick profanities to explain exactly *who* Nicole Davis is to him.

He presses one knee beside the chair. He leans in, gets closer, and I find no reason to stop him from sitting on my lap, even with a red impulse screaming at me to push him off and make it clear he can't say *those things* and put on a show with someone else in front of the cameras.

He brushes against my chest. He slides his hands to my shoulders and presses his weight against my groin, breathing heavily, letting a crimson flush paint his face.

"You don't need to threaten her," he says, softly. "She doesn't matter. Why don't you threaten *me*? Tell me what you'd do to me if *I* smiled at her

again…"

He leans into me, whispers his shameless invitation in my ear, closing his eyes in anticipation. *You don't need to threaten her.* My jaw locks.

"You're protecting her, huh?" I question, grabbing his hip. I squeeze. I need to take this out on something. "Why?"

He shivers and says, fascinated, "Protecting her? Oh, mister…" then sighs, brushing his mouth against mine. "Are you really jealous? I don't care about her… I care about the fact that the idea of her touching me drives you *crazy*," he whispers, sliding his hands inside my blazer. He grips my shirt with his nails, leaves a warm, wet kiss on the corner of my jaw.

Of course, he'll piss me off until I break his bones; he doesn't try to explain himself, doesn't justify it. I tighten my fingers on his thigh—I expect him to moan like the whore he is, to beg me to rip off his clothes, to ask for anything. I expect him to provoke me, to admit to fucking Nicole in the fucking restrooms.

He doesn't.

He says, slowly, as if his entire body wasn't reacting to me, "I'll do as you say. I'll stay away from her. I'll be good to you… I just have one condition."

My hand trembles with the effort of holding it back from closing around his throat, and he dares to say that—a *condition*.

"You are not in the position to condition anything, Nyx."

I spit the words through clenched teeth, but he just gives me that half-smile he always has before doing the worst things.

"But if I'm out of your sight, you don't know what I'm doing," he murmurs, tracing a line down my chest with his fingertip. "What I'm thinking. Who I'm thinking about." He pulls back to look me in the eyes. "I'll obey you. Every rule. But, at night... let me sleep in your bed."

His words stun me, and for a second—just a second—my hold loosens, and he takes advantage to run his fingers down my arm, taking my hand off his hip, placing my palm between his legs—hard as steel.

"I said you don't give me conditions, fucker," I hiss, grabbing his wrist to prevent him from continuing this idiocy. "You sleep where *I* tell you to sleep. And if I tell you to sleep on the floor at the foot of my bed like the fucking dog that you are, that's what you do. Understood?"

He bites his lip. His pupils dilate. And he doesn't stop his hips from grinding into my hand.

"You'd like to do that... ? Keep me as a pet. You don't know how good I can be," he says. He gets off on his own fantasy, moaning as he puts more weight on my hand. "How well I'll take your punishment if you think I'm disobedient. If you want me on the floor... I'll sleep there, mister..."

I can't fucking *stand* his filthy words, and I can't stand his goddamned *look*—so turned on and eager for the violence I *don't* have to offer him, not right now. My fingers press against his crotch to stop him.

"What the hell do you think we are? Lovers?"

"No..." He gives me a lewd smile. "You don't love me."

Fuck this. Fuck him.

I tighten my grip and squeeze. His moan dies in his throat. "I don't."

This is the answer to his confession. *I think I'm falling in love with you*. *This* is the answer. *I don't love you*. I can't love him, or anyone.

"But you like that I do," he whispers, leaning forward, running his hand over my cheek. I see the lust in his eyes—it's not him anymore, but that *slut*, Nyx in his most twisted form. He brushes his lips against mine and smiles, in a daze. "That I think of you all the time, mister... That you're always in my head..."

I think of him all the time. He's always in my head too. But it's an unbalanced, unstable fixation, not a *confession*.

I pull my hand away. I push him and get up—this is getting out of control, and I'm losing my ability to handle it.

"You'll obey me regardless of what you want. That's what it's about," I say. "Now, get out. I'm sick of looking at your face."

He catches my wrist.

"You want me to get out... but you don't want me to want anyone but you. *That's* how this works, right?" He gives me that fucked-up smile, but I'm too close to my limit.

I yank my arm away.

"Get the fuck out before I change my mind and fucking kill you," I order.

I can't look him in the eye. If he smiles like that at me again—like a goddamn slut, like I'm the only one for him—I don't know what I'll do.

I hear him step away.

I don't breathe until he's gone.

SVETLANA IS WORRIED. NYX'S REPORT ON OUR COLLABORATORS' LIVES SO far revealed no rat—it was ordered according to the trust and probability she saw in each of those people betraying us. This means those she judged most likely to betray have nothing, and that's eating at her as much as Nyx eats at me.

He completed 50% of the list. The full reports from other reliable sources for comparison arrived today without a conclusion pointing to betrayal.

The issue seems minor since Nyx became such a big problem for me, but Svetlana still has her head on straight. She continues to investigate the rat in our operations, the traitor who, ironically, was the reason I brought Nyx into this hell in the first place.

She tells me not to bother him, in a condescending tone—to let him keep the list of potential traitors as a priority task.

And I don't see him again. The image of him on my lap, the whisper of his provocations, the look of triumph when I threatened him… that will take a long time to leave my head. It's the most I can allow myself to see him—only in that disgusting memory that restarts every moment, repetitively, repulsively.

So, I create distance. I communicate only through Luca and divert Svetlana's request: I bury him in work. I give him impossible deadlines. Tasks that should take days, I demand in hours.

Luca warns me, "Sal's team would take a week," and I understand. Luca starts looking at me the way *Svetlana* looks at me, as if what I do to Nyx, *because* of Nyx, is a monstrosity. He, too, doesn't understand. Even having seen Nyx's perversion at first, now, Nyx only shows it to *me*.

If his mind is occupied with firewalls and encryption, it won't be occupied with me.

The problem is that he adheres to my absurdity. I shouldn't be surprised, after seeing him save my family's system in twenty-four hours. Each of my demands is met with perfection, detailed reports, and precision. At my desk, on the terminal—with every fucking completed task, he reminds me more that he's becoming indispensable, and I see favors traveling to his door. Indispensable to the whole fucking team, asking stupid favors all the time, and to *me*.

His work is impeccable. The perception he used at that poker table that completely stripped my men was only a fraction of his attention, and that

becomes clearer with each new report and service rendered.

The image of Nyx on my lap doesn't diminish, doesn't fade. It *spreads*.

It's the second pen I unintentionally break in half.

Nyx is the best hacker we've ever had. He is extraordinary, and I *hate* that he is. It would be much easier to get rid of dead weight, of someone who wouldn't make the slightest difference in any aspect of my life.

The worst part is that, in the ridiculous IT office of his daily job, he *obeys* me. I watch this. I watch each of that woman's—Nicole's—attempts at approach be met with disinterest and monotony.

It's late at night. The mansion is silent. I stare at a logistics contract I can't read. His absence is a black hole in the center of my concentration.

That's when Svetlana calls me.

"*We have something*," she says, without preamble. "*A burst transmission intercepted ten minutes ago. Directed to a ghost server in Estonia*."

I straighten in my chair. "What did Sal get?"

I can almost hear her disdain on the other end of the line. "*He managed to hit his head against the wall. He thinks it's an AES encryption variation with a quantum key, but it could take days to force decryption, if it's even possible.*"

I press my temples. Days. Svetlana doesn't sleep well either, I know—the time of this call is proof of that. The lack of movement from our rat puts her more on edge than if he were setting fire to all our bases.

"*We don't have days, Donya*," she continues. "*I told you to let the asset focus on unraveling the list, but this is more urgent.*"

The asset. The way she talks about him, as if he were a piece of machinery, irritates me. That's how I should see him too.

Svetlana calling me before deciding something alone also means something. She's tired of this unspoken tension. I am too. But isolating Nyx with absurd tasks was the only way to keep myself sane.

Of course, she doesn't know. And she *won't* know.

"What are you suggesting?"

"*Take the data to him. Now.*" She pauses. "*Assuming your management hasn't compromised his cognitive ability, he needs to break the encryption as quickly as possible.*"

I press harder. I feel a red mark outlining my fingers, the skin of my temple staining from the pressure. I *wish* I had fucked with him on a cognitive level. I *wish*.

I take a deep breath, forcing the rage to the bottom of my stomach. I won't give her confirmation of being who she thinks I am.

"His cognitive ability is intact," I say through gritted teeth. "Consider it done."

There's a pause on the other end of the line. Svetlana expected an explosion.

"*Keep me updated*," she finally says. "*Every hour.*"

She hangs up before giving a chance for any useless discussion.

I waste no time. I grab the tablet from the table, the recently sent encrypted data relighting the locked screen, and leave my office.

It's work. Just work. An order from Svetlana.

I make every excuse not to delegate this to Luca. Calling him would be the logical move, it would maintain the facade of my self-control, but logic abandoned me the moment that bastard smiled at me with a cigarette box in his hand. Logic went up in smoke when he confessed he almost got hard knowing I controlled him. This is much more than a masochistic fetish I can satisfy with a punch.

I don't want a report from Luca. I want to see his face. This realization that I try so hard to hide and drown doesn't disappear; it feeds on his silence, on the obedience he gives me even after I deny his demands and conditions. I have nowhere to vent this. This shithead invalidated all the hatred I've felt since the poker night—*my* asset—with the disdain of opportunistically detaching himself from all his coworkers to please me, telling me again and again the pettiness of caring who Nicole Davis is to him.

Fuck, how weak does he make me?

I stop in front of the door of the room I assigned him—the guards in the hallway pretend not to see. I don't knock. I am the owner of this house, *his* owner. I unlock the door with a fingerprint, turn the doorknob, and open it.

The room is completely dark. The only light source illuminates his face—flashes of green and white from a terminal scrolling a rapid sequence of codes. He doesn't stop typing for a second, immersed in the screen, and doesn't even notice my entry.

The ghost in the machine in its natural habitat.

I stand in the doorway, observing for a moment that stretches too long. The only things moving are the reflection of the code in his eyes and the rapid movement of his fingers. He's paler, with more dark circles. He hasn't

slept in over twenty-four hours. I should feel satisfaction from having pushed him to the limit.

I step fully into the room, letting the door close behind me. The sound of the click isolates us from the rest of the world and is what breaks him from his trance—I see the subtle jump of his fingers the instant he stops typing, but it seems like a physical impulse. His eyes don't leave the screen, his head keeps turning the gears dependent on the code.

"New job," I say. I walk slowly towards him and extend the tablet. "Svetlana wants this deciphered. Yesterday."

Finally, he turns his face to me. I see the empty energy drink cans around the desk, the coffee cups. The things he's been asking Luca for. Is he eating properly? The exhaustion throughout his body doesn't match the astute alertness of his state, with the level of detail and perfectionism of each report delivered to me.

He takes the tablet. And I don't leave. I should.

He looks at the data on the screen, and his eyes gain immediate focus.

"AES encryption?" he murmurs. I have the impression he's talking to himself. "Solid math. It's a military standard." He turns back to the computer. He opens a terminal outside his main window, and I see him typing something. He leans back in the chair with a sigh as a secondary blank window opens and loads a wiped operating system in seconds.

I waste no time trying to understand him. "Break it," I say, forcing myself to step away.

But he starts to speak.

"I won't break the encryption."

I narrow my eyes. "What?"

"If you took the fastest supercomputer on the planet today and put it to work exclusively on finding the key, without stopping, it would take a few billion years to test half the possibilities, and that's an optimistic estimate," he says softly, glued to the screen with a feverish intensity, typing again. "The energy needed to compute all the keys, with current technology, would boil all the Earth's oceans more than once. Trying to break the encryption is useless."

This irritates me. His only act of refusal waited to show itself *in front* of me? One of my men would have taken a punch for much less. I suppress the urge to smash his face against the computer screen.

"So you're telling me *you* can't?" I snarl. I make it clear that this possibility is a death sentence that even *he* won't like.

"I'm saying it's a dispensable effort," he says, and doesn't even deign to look at me. "If this is still about hunting rats, yours isn't that good. If he was, he would pass undetected. He just used a powerful tool."

And what irritates me most is how he just says it. He's not spitting arrogance on purpose, and yet he positions himself as if he's miles above me.

"Then enlighten me, you arrogant little shit," I say. I need to exert physical force not to grab him by the collar. "If breaking encryption is ‘dispensable,' what's your magic solution?"

"I don't attack the math."

I watch. Nyx is *stupidly* brave, but that was already established. He doesn't compute the insubordination of ending his monologue with *that*. He just types, and in the middle of lines and lines of indecipherable characters, a small section of pure text stands out.

He analyzes it. He bites the tip of his thumb and smiles a small, private smile of pure, unaltered satisfaction—a smile that isn't for me.

I cross my arms. I lean against the wall, watching that *thing* triumph, opening an editor and typing a sequence of codes. It's almost disturbing. He doesn't even stop.

"Where the hell did you learn that?" I say on impulse.

He doesn't take his eyes off the screen. The satisfied smile is still there, private, and it irritates me that it isn't for me.

"YouTube tutorials."

The answer is so trivial it sounds like a teenager's nonchalance.

"…Nyx," I warn him.

He laughs. "What? It's true."

"Tutorials don't teach you to bypass quantum security systems. And they certainly don't teach you to have the fucking audacity you have."

Only then does he stop. The rhythmic sound of the keys ceases, and he turns in the chair, facing me for the first time since I handed him the tablet. Illuminated like this, his smile isn't defiant, but soft. Beautiful. He knows he has me. He knows my curiosity is overcoming my rage.

"Do you really want to know?" he asks. He leans back in the chair and inclines towards me. "I'll tell you. But since you refused my last proposal, I hope you accept this time."

Of course. A manipulative son of a bitch to the end. Everything with him is a transaction, a power exchange. I prepare for some ridiculous demand.

"What proposal?"

"Tell me, what was the moment you were closest to death?"

My first instinct is to tell him to go to hell. Who does he think he is to demand a piece of my history, a moment of weakness? But then I look at him. The exhausted boy, illuminated by lines of code, who is becoming indispensable with each new service. The boy who looks at me as if I were much more than a captor. The curiosity, the necessity to understand what created him, what *drives* him, is stronger than my pride.

The memory causes a dry heat in me, a metallic, burnt smell, and a ringing in my ears.

"Car bomb," I say. "In Moscow."

It's all I say out loud. I remember the impact throwing me against a brick wall in an alley, the shower of glass and debris, the delayed understanding that the only thing that saved me was bending down to shield the flame of my lighter, trying to light a fucking Dunhill in the rain. A second.

It cost three of my best men, and weeks with broken ribs, ruptured eardrums, and shrapnel everywhere.

Nyx remains silent. He looks at me with an intrusive understanding for a boy who lives locked inside a room.

"…Want to know mine?" he says softly.

The intimacy of that doesn't let me answer. *Yes*? I don't know. I shouldn't say that, shouldn't *admit* that.

But my silence is the only permission he needs.

"It was on a highway overpass," he says. "On a Sunday dawn. It was starting to rain… and there were still many cars passing. I stood there for a while. Watching. The high-speed headlights leave a trail of light. The sound… turns into white noise."

He stares at some point on the wall. I await the conclusion of that story, the accident, what would threaten the life of a nobody looking at cars.

It doesn't come.

Only then do I understand.

He looks back at me with a melancholic smile. "I knew I could just wait. There would be a moment, in the future… my health isn't good. The

future will come in one or two decades. But I wanted… I wanted to be faster than that."

The understanding bothers me. The *feeling* bothers me. He's showing me a part of him I didn't ask for and shouldn't have the right to see.

"What stopped you?" The question escapes me, quieter than usual.

He looks away and thinks. As if finding the only thing that kept him alive was difficult now. And maybe it is.

Svetlana's voice echoes in my mind. *He doesn't seem crazy, he seems depressed.*

"I was… afraid," he says.

It doesn't fit him.

"Of what?"

He shrugs. "…The possibility that the last thought, the last moment of my existence… would be as gray as all the others. That the end would just be… more silence." His eyes turn back to me. The melancholy suddenly is inherent to him. "I started studying that day. Systems. I didn't lie to you—it was with YouTube tutorials."

That *confession.* Love. Was he telling me that I was the only thing that *prevented* him from jumping?

The rage I brought into this room deflates. In its place, a vacuum.

The genius who brought down my systems, the worm who moans under my touch, the boy who almost threw himself off a bridge because he was bored. The pieces don't fit. They form a fractured image I can't categorize, can't *control*.

Threats die in my throat. Insults sound childish.

"All of this… the systems, the games, the pain… is it just so you don't have to go back to a fucking overpass?"

He sees humor in that. He smiles. "Something like that."

Fuck Svetlana and her concern. Fuck Dmitry and his logic. They think I'm dealing with a problem and they don't realize I'm holding a broken piece of glass that thinks the only way to prove it's not in a thousand pieces is by cutting itself on me.

I move. I take the few steps separating us, stopping in front of his chair. I stare at the empty energy drink cans, the cold coffee remnants.

"When was the last time you ate something that didn't come out of a can or a plastic bag?"

He frowns. "I… I don't know. Today at lunch, maybe."

"A tuna paste sandwich doesn't count."

I look at his thin body, his hunched posture.

"And sleeping? Is that part of your ‘bad health' plan? Killing yourself from exhaustion?"

"You… gave me deadlines—"

"Fuck the fucking deadlines. When you finish this," I order, pointing to the tablet I gave him, "you're going to the kitchen. You're going to eat a real meal. And then, you're going to bed. Eight hours. No screens."

I move closer, until I'm hovering over him. I lower myself to his level. I force him to look me in the eyes.

"Listen here," I snarl. "You're not going back to any fucking overpass. Never again."

I see the confusion in his eyes, the way he tries to process my order.

"This isn't a request, Leonel. It's an *order*."

Nyx's mask cracks. The smile, the audacity, the armor of indifference… everything falls apart. For a second, I see only the exhausted boy behind it, the boy from the overpass, looking at me with a raw vulnerability.

His eyes fix on mine, confused, exhausted, and reverent. He leans forward.

He kisses me.

Soft, hesitant. He kisses me with *adoration*, and his cold fingers slowly slide along the contour of my jaw.

I should push him away. I should reassert my dominance, I should remind him who's in command.

But I can't.

Instead, I touch the back of his neck, entwine my fingers in his hair, and pull him to me, shattering the gentleness of that hesitation. I force his lips apart, yet it isn't enough to erase what he told me. It isn't enough to drown his broken glass edges, and they cut me, they cut me everywhere.

And he kisses me with the desperation of someone who only found a reason to exist in this life because I told him he couldn't throw it away. He kisses me, and I *hate* it because it breaks every wall I built, because I *need* this just as much as he does.

"No viaducts and no Nicole," he murmurs against me. "I can work with that."

I push him back, pinning him against the backrest of his chair, and it takes every shred of my self-control not to tear his shirt open. "Don't

fucking say her name."

Nyx laughs softly. "I'll say yours. I'll *scream* it if you want me to."

"Nyx—"

"*Dante*," he whispers my name like a prayer. He runs his hands over my back, my neck, as if he can't stop touching me. And fuck, I want that.

"Don't—"

He silences me, pulling my shirt and kissing me again, and again, and again, and every attempt at control I have goes to hell.

My hands are on his waist, pulling him closer, and I'm about to slam him against the fucking wall when an insistent vibration starts in my pocket.

"Fuck," I curse, pulling my face back a few inches to check my cell.

Svetlana.

Nyx stares at me, his lips swollen and red with a mixture of desire and adoration that makes me want to ignore this fucking call.

I pull away from him and straighten up, walking away from the chair. I try to recompose my posture as a boss, as an older brother, as anything other than the man who was about to completely lose himself.

Work. The encryption. The fucking tablet. My sister, who already looked at me like I was an uncontrolled monster. Everything is a fog with him looking at me like that.

I answer, hoarse. "Svetlana."

All she says is, "*Update*."

I see him out of the corner of my eye. Nyx gets up from the chair, bites his lower lip, and starts walking slowly towards me.

"He's working on it," I say, following Nyx's every move. "Your paranoia isn't going to speed up quantum encryption."

He stops in front of me. He raises his hand and, with torturous slowness, touches my chest, sliding his fingers over the fabric of my shirt.

"*I need a timeline. Sal is having a breakdown.*"

I hear the department voices in the background of the call. My mind doesn't compute that when Nyx leans forward and anchors himself to me, sliding his hand to my waist, pressing open-mouthed kisses on my neck.

My free hand, of its own accord, holds his hip. I pull the phone's microphone away. "How long?" I whisper to him.

He kisses the corner of my lips and murmurs against my skin, "Give me an hour."

I turn back to the phone. "He said one hour."

Svetlana's silence is long. Suspicious. I know what she's thinking. She knows I took too long to answer. She knows my voice is different.

"*Blyat*," I hear her curse in Russian.

And Nyx doesn't give a fuck. His hands move over me as if there aren't other things to think about. As if the rest of the world can burn around him as long as he can touch me.

Fuck. I can't. I can't think with him like this.

"*Don't get too close to this*," Svetlana says. "*If something goes wrong, you're the one who will have to put the bullet between his eyes. So don't get too close to him. Understand?*"

And that, at least, gets me to think clearly.

"You don't need to remind me how to do my fucking job."

I don't wait for her answer. I hang up. And then I stare at the fucking mess in front of me.

He's fucking killing me.

I grab him by the neck. He doesn't resist when I pull him back.

"One hour," I say. I didn't notice I was out of breath. "And then, you eat. And sleep."

"Eight hours?" he asks with a lewd smile, the fucking asshole. "Will you *watch*?"

"You'll *really* sleep, you fucking nymph." I push him towards the desk. "Go to work."

I move towards the door and slam it as hard as possible behind me, ignoring his eyes following me to the threshold.

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SEVENTEEN

LEO

MY BODY IS TOO HOT.

Before going back to work, I go to the bathroom. I turn on the sink. I wash my face, my neck, my hair, my fucking chest—because everything smells like him, *feels* like him.

Fucking hell.

No one ever cared about what I eat. No one ever showed the kind of worry he had. No one ever had the guts to question my work, to try to force me to sleep, to tell me I can't go back to an overpass. No one ever made me want to survive, not even for an hour more.

No one but him.

He fucking kisses me, and suddenly I want to eat fucking vegetables and sleep every fucking night. I want to exist in this shitty life just so I can touch him again, I want to survive for a thousand more touches like that. I want him to be my fucking reason. I want him to tell me that if I do that, if I eat and sleep and stop being so *dead*, I can have more. That if I exist, he'll touch me again; that if I obey him, I can be rewarded. I want to be the fucking air he breathes.

The thoughts are too much, too absurd, too *needy*. And yet I don't try to push them back. I let them come.

I go back to the computer. Dante's tablet is on the desk, displaying the encrypted data. My hands, still damp and with his residual scent, hover over

the keyboard. There's no time to waste, not when every second brings me closer to *more*.

I open my preferred code editor.

AES encryption is a vault with trillions, if not *quintillions*, of possible combinations. The security of an algorithm is never absolute—it's just a matter of time, resources, and creativity. But to break something that has never shown vulnerabilities before, a military-grade standard, considered secure enough to be used with classified government data, in *one hour*…

AES *was* used. Whoever applied it was someone who couldn't mask themselves—therefore, someone who *isn't* as good as the encryption they used.

While Dante was here, a basic forensic analysis on the file's wrapper gave me the message's digital birth certificate: the exact timestamp of its creation, down to the millisecond. It's fragmented—that increases the noise, but not the security, if they were lazy with key management. And they always are.

I write a script, line by line. My main clue is the timestamp. I'm missing the complement. The process ID? The software name? Every variable they ignored is a potential door. A flaw in the way they used this encryption, a habit, a detail in the message's metadata—these are pieces of information that reveal the recipe to create the key, not the key itself.

I go back to typing. I forge the weapon Dante needs until the first version of the script is ready. I execute it.

The screen turns into a green and white cascade. Lines and lines of text scroll by, a flood of attempts.

TESTING COMBINATION [TIMESTAMP: 1720282800, PID: 1234]... **FAILED**.

Testing combination [timestamp: 1720282800, PID: 1235]... **FAILED**.

Testing combination [timestamp: 1720282800, PID: 1236]... **FAILED**.

FAILURES. HUNDREDS OF THEM. THOUSANDS. IT'S NOT WORKING. NOT YET. I let the script run for a few minutes, exhausting the simplest combinations, the obvious ones, the ones *Sal* would have tried for days.

I stop the process. I look at the code again. The timestamp + PID combination is too simple. I need another variable, something the

programmer thought would be a good unique identifier. Something static. Fixed to the machine.

I refine the script. The new recipe to be tested will be the physical address of the network card. A hardware fingerprint. It's a gamble.

I run the script again. The screen comes back to life, testing the new logic against the different message fragments.

TESTING [TIMESTAMP: 1720282800, MAC: 00:1A:2B:3C:4D:5E, software: SecureChat_v1.2_beta]... **FAILED**.

Testing [timestamp: 1720282800, MAC: 00:1A:2B:3C:4D:5F, software: SecureChat_v1.2_beta]... **FAILED**.

Testing [timestamp: 1720282800, MAC: 00:1A:2B:3C:4D:6A, software: SecureChat_v1.2_beta]... **SUCCESS**.

THE SCRIPT STOPS. THE WORD SUCCESS FLASHES, SOLITARY AND triumphant.

I found the key—the same for all messages that used that same machine.

I type a command line in the terminal, applying the newly forged key to the set of fragmented files. The decryption process is almost instantaneous, a blink of an eye. The screen, once full of code lines and errors, is cleared.

And then, in crisp, clear letters, the text appears.

FRAGMENT 1 DECRYPTED: CALL ME ISHMAEL. SOME YEARS AGO—NEVER mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world.

Fragment 2 decrypted: Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm! Turn not thy back to the compass; accept the first hint of the hitching tiller; believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly.

Fragment 3 decrypted: Now, take away the awful fear, and my sensations at feeling the supernatural hand in mine were very similar, in their strangeness, to those which I experienced on waking up and seeing Queequeg's pagan arm thrown round me. But at length all the past night's

events soberly recurred, one by one, in fixed reality, and then I lay only alive to the comical predicament.

Fragment 4 decrypted: at night, in the mid-watch, when the old man —as his wont at intervals—stepped forth from the scuttle in which he leaned, and went to his pivot-hole, he suddenly thrust out his face fiercely, snuffing up the sea air as a sagacious ship's dog will, in drawing nigh to some barbarous isle.

THE FIRST LINE IS… *HERMAN MELVILLE*?

Is that it? The digital rat, the traitor Svetlana is looking for, is using a high-security encrypted transmission to... send chapters of *Moby Dick*?

No. Worse. *Fragments*. And out of order.

I've seen this before. A massive amount of data camouflages a real message in a random fragment—or fragmented among several. If there's a message hidden in the text, it has a different format. Geographic coordinate patterns, date and time formats, IP addresses… but defining a script that checks a list of baits won't work if the message is inserted in the middle of the original text. A sentence, a word. A subtle alteration.

I need this text complete and ordered.

I look at the clock. I have twenty minutes.

They need an index among several disordered fragments, a sequence number so the receiver can assemble the puzzle. So, I search the metadata —a simple script that ignores the text and renames each file according to its ID. I join them. The chaos of random fragments is now a single, gigantic text file, perfectly in order.

I try to download a copy of the original Moby Dick text, but the mob's network blocks me—a red page with *ACCESS DENIED*. I forgot for a moment that they think they have me on a leash.

I glance at the clock again. I don't have time to ask for permission.

A reverse SSH tunnel solves it. They always leave port 443 open for traffic that looks legitimate.

I type the command from memory, and in thirty seconds, I have access through a straw they don't know exists. The text file downloads in the blink of an eye. No one will notice.

I place the two files side-by-side in my system: the original Moby Dick and the organized version of the interception. The script will compare the two, letter by letter, and show me any discrepancy, no matter how small.

diff moby_dick_original.txt moby_dick_intercepted.txt

I PRESS ENTER. THERE'S NO IMMEDIATE RESULT. THE COMPUTER IS working, comparing millions of characters.

The seconds drag on. A minute. Two.

The screen fills with text. A massive block of 'deletions', entire chapters missing.

For a moment, I consider the possibility of a failed interception. But the idea dies before it's even born. I myself verified the sequence of IDs the organizing script collected: from 1 to 5.428, without a single number missing.

No. We got everything. They didn't even bother to send the whole book.

And, in the parts we *have*, the *diff* confirms that there are no alterations compared to an original PDF turned to TXT of Moby Dick. None, not even a single homoglyph.

Right.

If there's a message, it's not in the visible content—it can only be in the invisible structure of the data itself. Steganography.

I open my arsenal of forensic analysis. A scan of the least significant bits. I run the tool on the files. A graph appears, analyzing the data distribution. If there were a hidden message, there would be a peak, an anomaly in the randomness. The graph I see is flat. Clean.

Nothing.

Then, an analysis of extended metadata. Maybe the message is hidden in file information fields that aren't normally visible. I run another script.

CHECKING EXTENDED METADATA...
NO HIDDEN FIELDS FOUND.

I TRY EVERYTHING. I SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVE DATA STREAMS, I ANALYZE the slack space of each file for residual bytes. Every test returns the same result: negative. Clean. Empty.

I lean back in my chair.

Nothing.

There's nothing here.

Military-grade encryption. Content that's trash. Data structure impeccably clean, not a single byte out of place. No hidden code, no image, no coordinates. Just… emptiness.

There's no message. And that is the message.

The person behind this used the best available encryption to create an impressive, empty vault. The sequential IDs in the fragments weren't for the message to be reassembled; they were to make it *seem* like it.

They wanted to buy time. They wanted the Volkov elite to occupy themselves with a complicated and useless task.

And the sophistication…

The sound of the room door being unlocked cuts short my reasoning.

I don't need to turn around. I feel *his* presence.

The door opens. *Him*, and a soft floral scent—Svetlana.

"Leonel," Svetlana says. "I apologize for entering without knocking at this hour, but the time you requested has expired."

Polite, but her voice makes it clear that if I have nothing to deliver, I'll lose a limb.

I turn in the chair to face them. Svetlana has her arms crossed, the personification of corporate frustration. Dante is right behind her, his eyes fixed on me.

I smile. "Oh, you're going to like this."

I spin the chair back to the computer. I open the massive text file—our intercepted Moby Dick.

"Here's your little rat's message."

They exchange glances. Too much text. Svetlana takes out round glasses, dangling from a metallic chain at the ends of the frame, and fits them onto the bridge of her nose. She leans closer, and Dante watches, maintaining his distance—a silent wall exuding strength and impatience.

Svetlana's impassive face contorts. She frowns and purses her lips. "What the hell is this?" She murmurs.

"What you intercepted were fragments of Moby Dick. Have you read it?"

Svetlana shakes her head. "Moby Dick?" She repeats, incredulous. "Did you find anything in the middle? A… message, an acronym, a name…"

"Just good old Moby Dick." I smile at her.

I feel Dante's irritation radiating from him. He takes a step closer, narrowing his eyes at the screen.

"This is idiotic," he growls.

"Did you check everything?" Svetlana turns her face to me, holding the temple arm of her glasses.

"I ran some scripts that checked—they're direct inserts. Compared with the original book file, there's no difference. I looked in the metadata, possible hidden images… All the information was intercepted—the IDs have no missing numbers, so, in the end, all the rat wanted was to share a little literature."

Svetlana's face hardens. She looks like a woman who optimizes every second of her life, and the idea of having her resources wasted on a literary joke is surely a personal insult.

"Don't come at me with *literature*, Leonel," she says. The polite facade transfigures into the glacier of her impatience. "This is an insult. If there's nothing in the text and nothing in the metadata, it means you failed. What did you miss?"

Dante growls behind her. Just that nickname, "Nyx." Just a warning.

As much as I like the idea of him taking all this frustration out on me, I raise a hand to him, pretending not to see Svetlana's confusion as I address Dante instead of her.

"No, *this* is the message," I say. "I can explain all the checks and run them in front of you if you wish, mister."

Dante gives me a short nod, the only permission I need. Svetlana, for a moment, ceases to be the client and becomes an irritated spectator.

I turn to my terminal.

"AES-256 encryption is solid, the math is almost unbreakable by brute force, but the implementation here was lazy. They used a timestamp as a base for key generation with the MAC address of the source machine."

I pull up another window in the terminal, showing the lines of my script and running it. I retrace my steps.

"The script tested combinations of timestamp and possible MACs, forged the key, and deciphered the fragments—Moby Dick, so the hypothesis shifted to steganography. I ran a diff against the original book text, no alterations, no homoglyphs; I did a forensic analysis, checked the least significant bits, extended metadata, slack space of the files, and nothing. The data distribution graph is completely flat."

I turn to them again—to *him*. There's a fascination he barely conceals. He understood enough. He understood that I dismantled the problem in

minutes just as he ordered.

"The message is the absence of message," I say, without taking my eyes off him.

I see Svetlana straighten in my peripheral vision. She smooths her blazer, resuming an impassive mask and taking a deep breath.

"For what? To buy time?" She says.

"To buy time," I repeat.

She shakes her head. "Why?"

I lean back in the chair. Reasons.

"I have some hunches," I say, peeking at Dante again, waiting for him to show any sign of approval beyond a morbid fascination. "Considering this transmission indeed comes from the rat: if he's infiltrated, he has data from at least *some* of your operations. I bet this interception would cripple your entire IT for a few days—and I imagine that *was* the gamble. But this only makes sense if your team is also actively looking for the rat, because disrupting the process only means they stepped too close to the hideout. Are they?"

Svetlana's face hardens. She stops being an executive to truly look like Dante Volkov's sister.

"No," she says.

I smile. This is fun.

"So he knows I'm here, and probably has access to the progress of my work. Too bad he thought Moby Dick would take me more than an hour." I turn to Svetlana. "The rat is one of the next on your list."

The sound that comes out of her is more growl than word, as she pinches the bridge of her nose and closes her eyes. She makes a pause—some time for the anger to go down to manageable levels. She wants to throw someone down the stairs, but needs my brain attached to a functioning body to keep their corporate game alive.

She takes off her glasses, and when she opens her eyes again, she's perfectly composed.

"It seems you were worth it, Leonel," she says. "But the question remains—you don't know who they are."

"Oh, but I will."

I spin the chair back to the keyboard. I retrieve Svetlana's list of targets.

"There are ten names left," I say. "They will be on that list. What's the time frame?"

Svetlana, now back in her crisis manager element, responds immediately. "As fast as possible."

I nod, already turning back to the keyboard. My mind traces the paths, the vulnerabilities of the next ten targets. If I had to guess, I'd say the rat's among the next five—close enough to provoke them into sending a useless message to trip us up.

I hover my fingers over the keyboard, cracking my knuckles before starting. The instant I press the first key, I feel a pressure.

A large, heavy hand settles on my shoulder, pinning me in place. The scent of Dante—tobacco, whiskey, and adrenaline—makes me shiver, and my head suddenly empties.

"I don't recall giving you permission to continue," he says in a low growl. The vibration of his voice travels down my spine. I sigh. I want his hand to move to *other places*.

"Dante, we need this fast," I hear Svetlana, but her voice is distant now. I only feel Dante.

"The question wasn't for you," he cuts her off, without even looking at her. Her anger bubbles. All his attention is on me. "I gave you an order, Leonel."

I hold my breath. I bite my own tongue not to externalize it, not to let on how much Dante turns me on. He leans over me, slowly, and a woody trail of his cologne invades all my senses. Tobacco, cologne, whiskey—maybe a hint of leather. He presses the button on the back of the monitor and turns off the screen.

Click.

The sound ends the discussion. The screen is now a black rectangle, with an indicating yellow light—*hibernating*.

I have to brace myself in the chair not to stop Dante from moving away. I want him like this, so close that I can trace the most insignificant hints of his scent—a note of gunpowder, a note of soap.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Svetlana says. She sounds impatient, more than she should be. It's not the first time Dante has gotten on her nerves in a short span of time.

Dante straightens, but doesn't remove his hand from my shoulder. I wish he would squeeze hard. That he would slide his hand under my clothes.

"Asset management, Svetlana," he says. "He's no good to us with his brain fried by exhaustion. He'll do as I commanded."

He presses my shoulders in a silent order. *Stand up.*

I obey. Anything he wants.

Dante gives me a slight nod toward the door. The order is clear.

I obey.

When I pass Svetlana, I feel her icy gaze. She's furious.

The door closes behind me, and I'm left in the hallway with Luca, who is always profoundly uncomfortable being alone with me.

He gestures for me to follow him. Dante should have given the order in advance—*eat* and *sleep*, like a little pet. We walk in silence through the corridors, and from a distance, I can hear the muffled sound of raised voices coming from the office.

We arrive at an impeccably clean industrial kitchen, large enough to serve a battalion. Two cooks are dozing.

Luca clears his throat. The first one jolts awake, slaps the second, and both are standing with their faces creased from sleep and their spines straight.

"Yes, sir," one of them says. I have the impression he almost salutes. It would make sense. Luca has the best posture among all the enforcers I've seen, and he was only slightly less broad than Dante—he must have a military background.

"Prepare something for him," Luca orders. "Real food. The boss will check."

The cooks nod, terrified, and begin to move with a nervous efficiency. They don't question anything. They can't.

I sit on a high stool near a stainless steel counter.

The sound of the distant argument is still audible. They must be cursing at each other. Dante demanding control, and Svetlana demanding results.

Luca remains standing near the door. He's a guard made of stone and suit, always awake and available—a little robot at the Volkovs' command.

I yawn. Without any stimulus, my body feels heavy. I focus on the distant ticks of a clock, the metallic noises of the cooks, and the hum of the family quarrel. Something shatters on the floor. Dante is the type to break things against the wall. Or is it Svetlana?

"Do they fight a lot?" I ask.

Luca stares at me. He shows no reaction to the hum. Yes, they definitely fight a lot. "The Volkovs are passionate."

"Passionate," I repeat. "That's one way to put it." He doesn't have much freedom of speech here. It's understandable. All the Volkovs have a temperamental history. I watch him—the rigid posture, the very well-polished shoes, the tattoos on his hands. Coordinates, winged dagger. Special forces. I give him a half-smile. "And you, *soldier*? Do you often babysit like this?"

Luca's stone mask waves. It's not much. It's an almost imperceptible twitch in his jaw. His eyes drop to his hands, making sure the tattoos are still there, perhaps remembering how he got them.

When he raises his gaze to me again, it's with more caution. Reluctant respect.

"My job is wherever the family needs me," he replies. "In the field, yes; and unpredictable asset management."

He called me an *unpredictable asset*? He's blaming me for turning him into a babysitter. I almost want to apologize.

"So, you're like Dante's right-hand man?"

Luca tenses.

"*Mr. Volkov's*, yes."

I smile. The house rules. The rules that, coincidentally, no longer apply to me. Dante doesn't care if I call him by his first name. He didn't when his hands were on my waist, telling me never to mention any name but his.

The cook places a steaming plate in front of me. Steak, mashed potatoes, vegetables. Real food.

My stomach gives a hesitant growl. I've eaten chemical-packed shit for years—I haven't seen a dish like this in a long time. *Eat*. Dante's order had, too, a concern I hadn't heard directed at me in years.

I pick up the fork. I take a bite. The flavor is different from instant food, lighter. It doesn't taste like solid cancer—it tastes like a cook's work, like years to come, like compliance.

He demands I live. So I will.

For him.

THE VOLKOVS ARE STILL FIGHTING. I DON'T TRY TO DISTINGUISH THE WORDS —I don't need to hear to know that the subject is me. I am the anomaly they

can't categorize, the problem they both want to solve in opposite ways.

Luca stands guard by the door, pretending he can't hear the family war down the marble hall. The cooks move in a terrified silence. Washing the same pot. For the third time. Busy work to avoid existing.

Then, silence. The fight ceases.

I hold my fork over the empty plate. Counting the seconds. One minute. Two.

The door flies open.

Dante.

He isn't angry. He's worse than angry. He's calm. His eyes—black holes—sweep the room. The cooks are on their fourth wash of the same pot. Luca snaps to attention like a soldier.

"Luca," he calls, gravely. "Cancel my schedule."

A command that could topple economies. Luca blinks. "Sir?"

"For the next eight hours," Dante continues. "No one interrupts me. No calls, no exceptions."

Eight hours.

A delicious shiver runs down my spine, hot. Fuck. He's stopping an empire. For me. To make sure I follow a single order.

He turns to me. His gaze is a pressure on my chest.

"You," he commands. "Finished."

I nod, setting the fork aside. I push the plate forward.

"Get up."

I stand. The exhaustion hums beneath my skin.

He turns and walks, with no glance back. He expects me to follow. Of course I follow. I would follow him into hell itself.

The cooks sigh with relief. For them, Dante is a walking catastrophe. We pass Luca's silent vigil, who doesn't dare to look at us for a second longer, and enter the corridor.

Dante doesn't turn to make sure I'm there. He doesn't need to. He doesn't have to remind me that I'm at his command—I *am* at his command.

He walks, with me in tow. Through the corridor. Past the main staircase. Toward my bedroom.

We stop in front of the door, which he unlocks with his fingerprint. He pushes the door open, gesturing with his chin for me to enter.

I do.

Whatever they broke in there, they cleaned up. I search for what. A missing object, a displaced painting, anything to suggest a violent tantrum—I find only the absence of a lamp on the table.

I hear him lock the door. *Click*.

Now, there's only this room. Only him.

I don't move. He analyzes me, inspects me. He takes a few steps, the sound of his shoes muffled by the carpet.

"You're a mess," he says.

A ghost of a smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. I don't turn to face him. "Your doing, mister."

He stops behind me.

"My responsibility to fix," he murmurs. His voice sends a shiver down my neck.

Fix me, then. Break me a little more and put me back together again, in any way you want to.

I want him to tear off my clothes and throw me against the bed. I want him to hurt me. To choke me.

"Take off your clothes," he orders. He circles me until he's standing in front of me, and the tension from the fight with Svetlana is obvious in the hardness of his jaw.

So that's how it's gonna be. Obedience is easy.

I start. The first button, tugging it out of its loop. The second. The fabric of the dress shirt opens, with the marks he left on me still visible—spread across my neck, collarbone, chest. I want him to see. I want him to see what he did to me.

"Your sister seemed furious," I say as I undo the third button. The way Dante stares at my fingers makes me want to do this slower.

"Svetlana's anger is the least of your worries."

I hum. "You know I've seen worse."

The shirt is completely open now. It exhibits his work. The dark marks on my skin are his art.

He takes another step, closing the distance. His hand comes up, but he doesn't touch me. His thumb hovers over the darkest bruise on my collarbone. Something in him softens. I melt. "I know."

God. He has to stop talking like that.

The possessiveness I'm used to is still there, but that *something else*—that quiet acknowledgment—undoes me. I want more of it. I want to pry

open his control and see what else is hiding in there.

He must have seen the shift in my eyes, because he takes a half-step back, re-erecting his walls. "Go take a shower," he orders, pointing his chin towards the bathroom. "I want you clean."

And I want you.

"Yes, mister."

I don't wait for another command. I walk toward the bathroom, leaving my discarded shirt on the floor. I push the bathroom door open but don't close it all the way—a careless oversight. An open invitation.

I undress inside the bathroom. I see his shadow outside, I hear the firmness of his footsteps. A rustle of leather—the armchair in the corner of the room.

I turn the shower knob. The steam begins to rise, fogging the mirror, blurring the lines of the perfect bathroom.

He's out there. Listening.

I step under the spray. The hot water is a futile attempt to relax—my entire body hums with a single name. Dante.

My thoughts are a fucking mess. He's listening to the water hit the tiles, but does he hear my breathing? The small hitch in my throat when I think about his hands on me? Can he picture this? The water sliding down my skin, tracing paths his fingers should be tracing, his thumb pressing into the hollow of my throat. I lean my head back against the cold tile, letting the spray hit my face. It should be him.

I need to know he's still there. I need to hear his voice.

"Do you often listen to your employees take a shower, mister?" I say. "Or should I feel privileged?"

I don't hear any movement, any shift in position. Just the soft sigh of leather shifting as he adjusts himself in his seat.

"It seems that I'm stuck babysitting a needy boy," he says. "You don't make this easy."

I grab the soap, running the bar across my chest, sliding down my abdomen, toward the throb that begs to be touched.

"Is this what you think of me?" I ask. The soap slips, and I follow it with my hand, glowing dangerously near my groin. "I'm a programmer, *Mr. Volkov*—we're *very* methodical," I say, teasingly. He knows I'm playing, and the sound he lets out is somewhere between a huff of frustration and disguised amusement.

"And this is your method? Getting my attention? It's a dangerous thing to have, Leonel."

Is he imagining this? My hand tracing the marks he left. The bruises that are the only art I've ever wanted to wear. The way my body responds to the thought of him. The way I'm already hard, throbbing with a need that isn't mine to control.

"Just being methodical. Making sure everything is clean. As you ordered," I lie shamelessly, too breathy. There's nothing clean about my thoughts right now. They're dirty, filthy, and every single one of them has his name on it. I want him to come in here. I want him to push me against this cold tile. "Is there any part you'd like me to focus on, mister?"

His voice is deeper. Rougher. "Finish, Nyx."

That voice is going to be the death of me. It's an order, an unmistakable warning that I'm pushing the boundaries.

I don't give a single shit. I need him.

"You could always come in," I say, my voice low, letting the lust slip out. "Help me finish. I wouldn't mind."

A low growl of warning. "Finish *your shower*."

I squeeze my cock. It's good, but it's not his touch. Never will be.

"Dante," I call his name. A plea. "Tell me how to touch myself for you, and I will."

This time, there is a pause.

The pause stretches.

Fucking hell.

"Dante," I plead. "I want your hands on me."

I hear the rustle of the armchair's leather as he stands. One. Two. Three heavy steps on the carpet. The sound of them stops in front of the bathroom door.

The doorknob turns. The door opens with a push, hitting the wall.

He enters the bathroom, closing the door behind him. His shoulders are broad, his suit impeccable. His eyes fix on me. He's not angry. He's far beyond anger.

He walks to the glass shower stall. Without hesitation, he opens the door and steps under the shower.

With me.

I leave the soap aside as the water soaks the expensive fabric of his suit. The black of his suit turns to pitch. The fabric clings to the muscle on his

shoulders, his arms. Beneath it, his white shirt goes transparent, mapping every line of his torso. His leather shoes squelch on the wet floor. There's no time to process, no time to admire—he walks until his chest is pressed against mine, until my back slams against the tile.

Yes.

Hot water runs over both of us, mixing in the space between our bodies. He forces my chin up, forces my eyes to meet his.

Yes.

"You don't stop, do you?" he snarls, his voice vibrating through his chest and into mine. "You *have* to beg for it."

His hands move from my chin to my neck. My pulse quickens under his skin.

He leans in, his mouth inches from mine.

"You wanted my attention, you needy whore," he whispers, his lips brushing mine. "Now you have it."

His hand digs in with force. With a single swift movement, he turns me.

My chest, my arms, the tip of my already hard cock, everything slams against the tiles of the wall. The contrast with the warm water and the soaked fabric of his clothes pressed against my back is delightful. He pins me.

"This," he growls in my ear. His free hand moves up, his fingers unceremoniously tangling in my hair. He pulls hard. My head is thrown back, and I arch my neck, exposing my throat to the jet of water.

I moan. It's exactly what I wanted.

His mouth brushes the skin behind my ear. "You like to obey, you fucking bitch?"

My knees feel weak. The word—*bitch*—goes straight to my cock.

He yanks my hair harder. "*Answer*."

Tears form in my eyes. The pressure in my scalp is exquisite. "Yes, mister."

I like to obey. I like to be used by him, I like to feel his strength—a single touch is all it takes for him to reduce me to nothing. He makes me want to kneel at his feet and give up every bit of power I have left. I would beg. I would fucking beg.

"That's all you do," he growls. "That's all you *can* do—take orders like the slut you are."

Fuck, his voice alone makes me want to cum. I would let him do anything he wanted—and he knows. He's felt me shake under his hand.

He moves his knee, nudging my legs apart, spreading my thighs. The feeling of his pants, soaking wet and glued to his muscular legs, pressing against me is fucking perfect. I move, wanting friction—

He pushes my face against the tiles. "Don't fucking move."

I don't move. I wait.

I hear a zipper opening. The rustling of a belt. His free hand wraps around my throat and holds tight. He grinds against me, his hard cock rubbing against the crease between my ass.

I moan. It's too much. The hot water, the hard tiles, and his hand, tight, constricting. He squeezes and holds—fucking holds, pressing against my pulse. I'm lightheaded.

My cock aches.

"Don't come until I tell you," he orders.

The thick, hot tip of his cock slides down the cleft of my ass. My skin tingles, I clench. I wait—and I can feel the pressure of it as he begins to push against my entrance.

"Don't you fucking come without my permission."

Fuck. Fuck, that's good.

"Dante," I say his name with reverence. Like I fucking mean it. "Fuck, Dante."

He pushes harder.

His free hand wraps around my hip, and he yanks, forcing me to feel every bit of him. He sinks his fingers in the skin of my hip—a reminder—and thrusts hard. My muscles try to tighten, to shut him out, but there's no strength left. He pushes in anyway—dry, brutal—and it fucking hurts. God, I want it to hurt. The sudden fullness forces a ragged moan out of my chest as my fingers scramble for something to hold onto and I scratch, useless, at the smooth wet tiles.

The hand on my hip slides forward, curling around my cock.

He's in control of everything, every bit of it—the pleasure hits me as he pumps inside me, again and again. His hand strokes up, twisting, sliding down—the lack of air—the sensation of it—his cock—I feel dizzy—everything is spinning, all I can think about is him.

"Dante," I groan, breathless. His grip is so fucking tight—

"Not yet."

My eyes close. Everything is white, my skin is burning up—

"*Not yet*, whore."

His growl calling me whore almost makes me come.

"D-Dante, don't—" I try to warn him, but he only clenches my neck harder, forcing the last air from my lungs.

I can't fucking think. It's all him, all his voice, all the water and steam, the feeling of him inside me, and my vision turns dark around the edges, a small pinprick of light left when he sounds like a fucking god, saying, "Come, you fucking slut."

I do. I do in the same moment he spills into me, with his teeth biting into my neck. I come all over his fingers, on the shower wall. My eyes are open, but I don't see anything. It's an eternity or a few seconds. It doesn't matter.

His teeth, dug into my skin, are replaced by a brush—a kiss. The hand that choked me loosens. "Breathe," he whispers.

The air fills my lungs again.

I inhale and exhale—Dante—Dante, Dante, *Dante*, and I feel the water sliding down my body again, I feel the cool tiles against my chest, and I feel Dante. *Dante*. His mouth pressed to my shoulder, his skin touching mine.

The fragments of reality click into place for something beyond us—the bathroom. Yes. My bathroom, in a Volkov mansion, and the shower is on. I look down. The water washes away the mess we made as a thin red trail runs down my leg. How deep he went. And Dante is dressed.

I push myself against the wet wall. His hands loosen on me in a silent permission for me to turn, still holding tightly enough to anchor my useless, trembling legs.

If it weren't for his hands, I would lose my balance at *this sight.*

Dante. Soaked, dripping.

His hair, always impeccably combed back, is wet, heavy, darker, and slicked down, with a rebellious strand stuck to his forehead. Drops of the hot water run down his face in a delicious trail to his jaw, and his eyelashes hold droplets, looking thicker.

And the dress shirt. White. Transparent, clinging.

The rumors don't do Dante Volkov justice.

He is monstrous. Monstrous in the most stunning way possible. The definition of his muscles is obvious, and I want to trace the borders of each

one. His skin, obscured by the fabric, is marked, painted—I see the shapes of scars, tattoos.

I stare at him. *Dante*. His thousand-dollar suit is soaked, *ruined* because of me. I lean against his chest, feel the fabric of his shirt. He doesn't push me away. He looks at me with the same harshness I already know, attentive, and now, with softened edges. I slide my hand to his jaw. I feel his hair, the nape of his neck, with my fingers. I lean in. And I kiss him.

The hot water jets stream between us. They stream over our lips, and I feel them running down the back of his neck, on my fingers. Dante squeezes my waist. He pulls me closer, kisses me back, deeply, devouring me every time his tongue touches mine.

It's delicious to kiss him in the water.

I slide my thumb inside the collar of his shirt. "How much did this suit cost?" I whisper against his mouth.

He bites my lower lip. Hard. "Too much."

"Ruined…"

I tug at his shirt, trying to undo the buttons.

"The cost of dealing with you."

He steps away from me. Three steps. I'm forced to watch him leave the shower stall, dripping on the tiled floor as he walks. He reaches for a towel from the rack. He slides his blazer off, wearing that white—soaked transparent—shirt. His arms, his back. I'm fucking hypnotized. His back muscles bulge, contracting, relaxing as he dries off. The tattoos that run down his arms, the ones that look like snakes, and the ones that are words; the scars that cover his back, the ones that are faded with age. I can see them all clearly.

He looks like a fucking god.

"Stop staring and finish your shower," he orders, not looking at me.

I sigh. "You're making this hard, mister."

His gaze narrows. "Now."

I bite back a smile and obey.

He towels himself dry. I take the soap and finish my shower, running it over my increasingly sore muscles. New marks are already forming—purplish bruises on my hips where his fingers squeezed.

I wash away the remnants of him and the blood.

When I'm done, he's already back in the room. I dry myself, towel the excess water from my hair, and apply a new dressing to the bitten palm of

my hand. I walk back into the room with the towel wrapped around me, putting every fresh mark on display for him.

He watches me from the leather armchair. His blazer is gone, and his clothes are no longer soaking wet, just damp enough to cling to his frame. I can trace the lines of muscle, the black ink of his tattoos beneath the fabric. It's an aphrodisiac.

I put on whatever clothes Luca left for me one day—clothes in my size that still seem far too loose. I've been underweight for a long time. I don't care. I get dressed in front of him. He's already seen everything there is to see.

The moment I'm done, he speaks. "Bed. Now."

I don't fight it. A half-smile is my only rebellion, getting in bed and pulling the thick covers over me. I settle into the mattress. It's softer than mine—I've gotten used to it as best I can, at this point—and definitely more expensive.

He stays still. Is he going to watch me all night?

I stare at the ceiling. The room is poorly lit by the crack under the door, with the broken lamp now gone. With the adrenaline fading, the marks begin to ache. The wound I inflicted on my own palm, the bite on my neck, the bruises on my hips, the fissure between my legs. That doesn't stop my exhaustion. The throbbing of that molar was much more potent than this. What's truly keeping me from closing my eyes and blacking out is the crash. The dopamine is gone. All that's left is a chronic serotonergic dysfunction. That, and him. Watching me exist. He is the anchor in my fucked-up chemistry. The only thing tethering me to the moment.

It's enough to hold on.

I turn over in bed. Towards him. I could get used to this, to this view. To admiring him with no filter at all.

"You know, no one ever cared if I ate," I say. "If I slept, if I'd jump off a fucking overpass. Only you. A little scary, don't you think?"

A grunt. "Don't start."

He thinks I'm provoking him. How funny. "It's true. My mother thought I was a biological mistake. She was afraid of me. But you make it seem like I have some value."

His face isn't so tense. He's listening to me, and I recognize the Don in a slight furrow of his brow. Always serious, always authoritarian.

"You talk too much shit."

I smile. It's true.

Indifference is my normal. My mother looked at me like someone staring at a sick animal in the middle of the road. With care, with loathe, with pity. Sometimes fear. She wasn't a bad mother. But a child who doesn't play with others, who doesn't cry at funerals, who expresses nothing when hit scared her. She saw the aberration that Dante sees. An incurable disease.

I don't show this side to others. Classmates, coworkers—Nicole, Chad. They'd be afraid. I spare them. I pretend. I have to.

But Dante doesn't pull away. He touches me. He invades me. He gives me what I need to know that I'm real, that I exist. The disgust is, too, a form of recognition. And this. *Concern*.

I slide a hand over the new bruises. His signature.

"Mister," I call out, and repeat, teasing him with a formality that never existed between us, "*Mr. Volkov.*"

A low growl from the chair. He's beautiful when he's impatient.

"If you're not going to come to bed with me, will you give me a goodnight kiss?" I provoke. "Or I won't be able to sleep."

He shakes his head. The words are a tired reflex. "Shut the fuck up, Nyx."

I laugh. "Anything for you."

He glares at me. The sudden intensity sends a shiver down my spine. Then, he grips the arms of the chair and stands up. He, massive, approaches me in his damp clothes, in his visible muscles.

Instead of clenching his fists, gritting his teeth, hurting me, he leans in. He bends down toward me, and my smile dies at his proximity. It's intimate, seeing him like this, in a dark room, in the dim light. It's intimate that he looks at me this way.

He kisses me. No tongue, no biting. Just a kiss, a lingering press of his lips that erases any logical thought that dares to cross my mind.

"Now sleep," he orders softly.

I don't let him go. My hand fists in his damp shirt, pulling him back. I want the real thing.

This time, he gives it.

I hold the back of his neck, running my fingers through his hair, and he slides a hand over the outline of my body over the blanket. He touches my jaw, holds my face, ruins me all over again.

I'm breathless when we separate. I trace my fingers down, from his neck to the defined line of his collarbone. He watches me, torn between curiosity, irritation, and that softness that hides where it can.

"Thank you," I whisper.

I take my hands off him, and he takes his off me. He straightens up, smoothing his wet shirt.

My head hasn't been this silent in years. Tonight, the silence is the color of Dante's eyes.

I WAKE UP AND DANTE IS GONE.

I wish he wasn't. Wish I could start my day with him. Every day. But he's Dante Volkov. Empires don't run themselves.

A guard I don't know knocks on the door. He tells me that Mr. Volkov's orders are for me to eat.

Being his property doesn't sound bad.

The cooks lay out a feast. Eggs, fruit, bread, oatmeal. All of it cut into small, manageable bites. For my newly restored tooth. A detail. He thinks of the details. And for that, I want to repay him.

A crescendo of high-heeled footsteps draws my attention to the hallways. The cooks tense up, though the guards remain motionless, and Svetlana appears in a beige blazer and a high ponytail.

She looks at me. At my plate, at the guards. And says, specifically to the cooks, "Out."

She doesn't have to say it twice. It's an almost visible relief for them to leave Svetlana's clinical scrutiny. Dante is an eruption. Svetlana is a surgical frost. You fear them both.

She glides to the table. I watch the cooks vanish down the hall. "You must have had fun yesterday," I say to the space they left behind. "I heard the fixture break from my room."

She assesses me in silence. I eat my scrambled eggs.

She rests a hand on a chair back, a staccato tap of red nails on wood. Ignoring the bait. "My brother informed me of your lack of rest. An exhausted asset is prone to errors."

So that was his angle—functionality. An exhausted asset makes mistakes. Pragmatism. The language she understands.

"But that's not what I came to talk about," she continues. "I heard about your atypical reactions to pain. But you're black and blue, Leonel. As I assumed, you acquire mysterious fresh wounds each time my brother comes to you. That can't be sustainable."

And she sees the wounds. Of course she does. I forgot to cover my neck. A map of his ownership—the hickeys, the red band where his hand squeezed the air from my lungs, the blossoming constellation of teeth marks. All on display.

I shrug. I don't care that she sees. Not really.

"What can I say? He has a strong hand."

She doesn't find that amusing. "Are you being forced? I need to understand the nature of this relationship, and there are places where this family draws the line."

The word "relationship" is amusing. There is no relationship, no rules, and certainly no lines to draw. Yet, he cares. He orders me to stay alive.

"Mrs. Volkov, your brother is the sole reason I haven't jumped off a bridge. He can do whatever he pleases—I won't stop him."

She stares. The gears are turning, but the math isn't working for her. No one would get the math. "Dante has a temper, Leo. His urges are unpredictable."

"So, it's better that they're with me instead of out there. Don't you think?"

Her lips twitch, and her jaw tightens. I see the resemblance to Dante. She's tense, angry. "I'm trying to understand what kind of person you are."

I give her a smile. "What do you think, Mrs. Volkov?"

"I think," she says, leaning in, "you're a self-destructive idiot."

She looks like Dante. She has the same harshness, the same authoritarian stance. The same aura, even with the sharp, professional tone of voice. Dante Volkov's sister. They share the same DNA.

Of course, she's tense. The rat hunt was delayed in eight hours. Because Dante was *concerned.*

I give her what she wants. Reassurance. "You'll have your rat today, miss. Give me a few hours after my shift. It's done."

The anger in her face—*Dante's* anger—recedes. The ice queen returns. "Don't be late."

"Of course not."

She doesn't have the same sadistic tendencies—Svetlana is just professional. She just wants the job done. This is her problem; Dante's unpredictability and my reactions to it.

"Good," she says. "I expect results."

She turns, pausing by the motionless guards at the door.

"East Wing. Double the security detail. Immediately."

"Yes, ma'am," says one the guards.

Of course. We're getting close. A cornered rat might get desperate, might bite back. She's not taking chances.

With a rustle of her blazer, Svetlana is gone.

I finish my eggs. The taste of real food, of Dante's concern and Svetlana's pragmatism. Two sides of the same coin. The equation is simple: They need me. And as long as they need me, I exist.

Later, the office. I steal Chad's headphones when he's not looking. Nicole is there. Messy bun. She doesn't notice. Her smile is genuine as she tries to pull me into conversation. Weekend plans. The new coffee machine. Anything and nothing. I offer her a practiced smile—my shield—and she's disappointed, thinking the mass layoff got to me. It's a cruel game. I play it. For him.

After, I walk straight to my room, escorted by more guards than usual. Luca tells me Dante is out. The corridor, too, has more guards than usual.

I ignore them. If Dante's not home, then I go directly to my purpose: the list.

I start with the obvious ones, just as Svetlana ordered. The likely rats.

Target one: Eleanor Vance. Senior accountant. Meticulous records. I dig for some time—finances, online book club, shopping habits. Nothing. Just the tedious life of a woman obsessed with budgets and historical romance. Dead end.

Target two: Marcus Thorne. Head of logistics. Secret high-stakes card addiction. Expensive. Lonely. But no treason. Dead end.

Target three: Sofia Diaz. Network architect. Young. Bright. Her digital footprint is a ghost town. Too clean. Frighteningly clean. It doesn't fit the profile. Dead end.

The list goes on. Project managers. Data analysts. More dead ends. I dismantle them digitally and find nothing but banality.

Then my eyes land on the next name.

This one I know.

Only two names left— the ones Svetlana placed as least likely—and one of them is Salinger Coleman. *Sal.*

Head of Volkov cybersecurity.

I'd seen him tremble in Dante's presence, a human-shaped flak jacket sweating through his shirt. A coward. He can't even look *me* in the eye, let alone a *Volkov*.

This is useless, I think, for a second. This asshole can't even talk to Dante without stammering, let alone *betray* him. He'd faint just from the thought.

But a job is a job. So I check.

Rutgers degree. An impeccable corporate resume before he took the mob's dirty money. Years in the Volkov orbit. Reliable. I dive into his digital life; not just the company logs, *everything*. Personal emails, browser history, encrypted calls, crypto wallets.

And there's the first weirdness.

His digital hygiene is immaculate. Annoyingly so. It looks like he knew someone would come looking one day, like the obsessive tidiness of a man pissing his pants in terror.

I move past his robust security protocols, the standard encryption. Ignoring the facade. I cross-reference the login records from his less-monitored servers. The archives. I compare the timestamps on data packets sent from his personal machine after hours. Looking for a nanosecond discrepancy. A retroactive edit. I analyze the metadata of seemingly harmless images in his emails. Looking for hidden messages, for steganography. The tactic of an amateur who thinks he's smart.

It's with my eyes fixed on a line of hexadecimal code representing Sal's mouse movement—consistently, irritatingly human—that the low hum of the air conditioner falters. A light in the hall, visible through the crack in the door, blinks once. A nervous tic in the mansion's wiring.

I ignore it. Probably a faulty sensor the local IT team never bothered to fix.

I get into the debug logs of his home server. A small NAS. The place where a normal person gets sloppy. But not Sal. The logs are sterile. Not a single error flag. I run a checksum on the older media files, hunting for the ghost of a single altered bit. Nothing.

The light in the hall blinks. Again.

No. This house is a fortress. Redundant power, cascading firewalls, automated failovers. A power dip is impossible. It would trigger alarms.

But the only thing coming from the hall is silence.

I refuse to be sidetracked. If Sal is the rat, he's buried deep. I pivot to the reverse proxies he uses for external access. I analyze the packet latency to domains outside the Volkov circle.

A tiny, almost imperceptible flutter in the timing. A detour. Not random. Intentional.

I follow the trail. It leads to encrypted traffic with a known hub for digital mercenaries. My kind of people. And there, buried in thousands of seemingly innocuous data packets, is a whisper. A fragmented text. Obfuscated. Hidden in the data stream of a burner messaging app I know by heart. The kind you use when you're out of time.

I open a deobfuscation script. The letters flash on the screen. The words solidify.

THEY'RE GOING TO FIND OUT AT ANY MOMENT. YOU'LL HAVE A FIVE-MINUTE window.

SAL. THE COWARD. GNAWING AT THE WALLS OF HIS CAGE TO WARN HIS contacts.

I check the time logs.

…*Two minutes ago.*

A heavy, unmistakable thump echoes from outside the room. The sound of meat hitting meat.

I rip off the headphones. The ones I stole from Chad, in silence, just to have something blocking the real world. The flickering lights, the humming AC—all gone.

Dead silence.

A creak. A hurried whisper. Muffled sounds of a struggle.

Those aren't Volkov guards.

The door to my room splinters inward. A breaching charge. Thick smoke, stinking of gunpowder and burnt metal, pours through the gaps. Instinctively, I duck down in the chair, covering my face. The smoke burns my eyes, my throat.

Through the haze, I see silhouettes. Men in black. They're not Volkov muscles, they're not Dante's brutes.

In the same instant, the mansion's alarms shriek to life in a deafening wail. Shouts from the guards, gunfire, the eruption of automatic weapons.

Fuck, Sal, you screwed me.

The silhouettes cut through the smoke. Two of them. They move low and fast against the red strobe of the emergency lights, ignoring the firefight tearing up the hall.

One of them is on me before I can process a single thought.

The stranger presses his black glove against my mouth. It's impersonal. Another arm pins me, dragging me with a black open cylinder to take cover behind the desk. The substance is on the glove. I try to hold my breath. It doesn't matter. A sweet, acrid smell floods me.

My muscles go slack. My vision tunnels. The shrieking alarms, the gunshots, the screams—it all fades into a distant, muffled dream.

The last thing I see is the masked man, a captor doing his job. No malice. No anger. A gray fucking *job*.

The world turns black.

And I think of him.

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CHAPTER VI

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EIGHTEEN

DANTE

CLAUSES. Percentages. Acquisitions. The buzz of a conversation I could ignore. *That wire transfer raised some red flags. The statute of limitations is still in effect. You're looking at a potential RICO case. We can restructure the assets offshore*. The names of the companies, the names of the people. They blur. They sound the same. Shelf corporations. Shell companies. Nominee directors. Blind trusts.

More of the same.

I fucking hate reunions.

I look at the skyline of Philadelphia. Glass. Angles. All sharp and new. Skyscrapers—if you can call them that. It didn't used to look like this. Back then, it was just the old banks, the brick buildings, the weight of history in stone. The City Hall was the tallest, with William Penn watching over like some tired saint. I remember being a kid and hearing the old-timers complain. They'd spit on the sidewalk and curse the new steel towers that had the audacity to look down on him. Something cracked after that. I used to like the idea of a place that didn't need to reach for the clouds. It all feels like a cheap imitation. Too quiet, too sterile. A place like this could never hold *him*. Nyx belongs to New York.

God, Nyx. Even here. Even now.

I try to think about anything else. The case, the names, the files on the table. He gets in. That smirk. That fucking laugh.

I imagine what he'd say about this view. I shouldn't. He'd call it soulless, leaning on the glass like he owns it. He'd mock it, the shiny new money and the suits and ties; the boardroom, the bullshit.

Every sentence starts to bend his way.

"You seem distracted, Dante. Everything alright?" Charlotte whispers at my side.

A lawyer, one of the brightest. Smart, blond, pretty. Her eyes linger too much, her voice a bit too soft. It's tempting to entertain it like I did countless times before. The same voice, the same eyes. She could be another distraction, just as empty as all the others.

But Nyx. Nyx with his laugh.

"Just business," I say.

She touches my arm. It's soft. Nyx has soft edges too.

Fuck, why did it have to be him? Why couldn't it have been anyone else? I should have him killed. I should have him shot in the fucking face for this, for being in my head like this. I can't even have a simple reunion with some idiots without thinking of him.

Charlotte whispers again, "Are you sure? You seem..."

I don't want her here. I don't want any of this. I want… something else. Something raw, unpredictable, infuriating. Something that burned.

I pull my arm back and get up. The lawyers around the table go silent.

"I need a smoke," I say.

I leave. No one tries to stop me—no one dares to.

My guards follow. Two of them, always. I go to the parking lot, to the car. I lit a cigarette, lean against the hood, and even the taste of this fucking cigarette reminds me of him—in my office, giving me a Dunhill pack with an adoring smile.

Why him?

The guards take their distance, standing by the doors. They know the rules. They don't come close, don't interrupt.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I fish it out.

Luca. I frown. He rarely calls when I'm in meetings.

"Talk."

"*Sir, there's been a breach. Security systems are offline.*"

My first thought is Nyx. The little shit couldn't just enjoy the game; he had to shatter the board. But the thought dies. Luca's breathing—heavy, ragged—isn't the sound of a man reporting one of Nyx's infuriating pranks.

And Nyx… Nyx was happy, *disgustingly* so. He was twisting me into knots, *reveling* in the control I exerted over him. This isn't his move.

"What?" I rush him.

"*They took out the perimeter guards. They knew the layout, the blind spots. They went straight for the East Wing*."

The East Wing. *Nyx's room.*

The rage, the frustration—everything burns in an instant. I crush the cigarette between my fingers.

"Who?"

"*The cameras were off, sir. We can't identify them. They took the asset."*

They're fucking dead.

They're all fucking dead.

"Gather the men," I order the only thing that makes sense. "You tell the whole house—I want these fuckers *alive*. I will kill every fucking one *myself*."

THE MANSION IS IN CHAOS. A KIND OF CHAOS I HAVEN'T SEEN SINCE THE last great territory war fifteen years ago. But this is different. It's *personal*. Ambulances wail at the entrance, carrying away bodies, or what's left of them. Four of my men. *Four*. Too high a price.

Luca, with a graze wound on his arm, curses as one of the trusted doctors finishes a bandage, staining the velvet of the living room sofa with blood.

Hallways are riddled with holes, walls perforated by bullets, and what was Nyx's bedroom door is now just a black hole.

Svetlana waits for me at the entrance to the room.

"Dante!" she exclaims, hurrying towards me. "We've had numerous casualties. Several men were taken down—they were aiming for Hays."

Rage erodes me. Aiming for Hays. For *Nyx*. The son of a bitch is too important, too valuable an asset to be a direct target. This means the Malakovs know he's our goddamn tactical advantage.

"Sal is gone," she adds. "And the IT team is in chaos. We're trying to figure out where this attack originated."

No. Sal is loyal. Sal has been with us for years. This is a fucking game, a message. They took Nyx *and* Sal. The head of security. This is a direct blow to my throat.

"His family," I say. "Do we know where they are?"

Svetlana blinks, surprised. "I haven't even started looking into that..."

She is efficient, logical, but she doesn't understand the visceral urgency. Chances are Sal is collateral damage, a way to destabilize us further.

But I don't care if Sal was taken or if he *fled*. His family is a variable. And variables need to be controlled.

I walk into the room. Luca moves his shoulder with a grunt.

"Luca," I call. "Need some time?"

"Negative, Mr. Volkov," he says immediately. "I'm fine."

The doctor cleans his metal forceps. Luca got stitches. "I would recommend you rest, sir," the doctor says. His voice dies with each word as Luca glares at him.

"Sal's family," I say, ignoring the doctor. "Find them."

He doesn't question it. He knows we need to follow protocol regardless of who disappears. Luca stands, leaving the doctor to shrink into himself, and pulls out his phone, walking out of the mansion. He winces in pain. If he weren't able to be functional, he would have said so. I let him go.

"Does Dmitry know yet?" I ask Svetlana.

She nods. "He's on his way. But the security systems are compromised. We can't track their entry point."

"They knew," I state. "The rat gave them the keys. It doesn't matter. Every one of them will be dismembered until Nyx's whereabouts are revealed."

Rage bubbled inside me. They touched what is mine. That son of a bitch drives me crazy, but he's *my* problem. No one else has that right.

"I want every camera, every access log, every motion sensor from the last month turned inside out," I order, turning to the men who remained, many injured, but all with their eyes fixed on me. "If there's a single fingerprint, I want it. And if there isn't..."

Svetlana flinches. She understands the implications. Blind retaliation means blood. A lot of it.

"And the Malakovs?" she asks.

"The Malakovs are the main target. They will pay for this. Every property, every street they think they control, every man. They will regret

the day they thought they could turn my fucking house upside down and take what's mine."

The air smells of broken plaster, gunpowder, and the sweet, metallic scent of cooling blood. Blood doesn't stain marble if you clean it fast enough. My men move like frightened ghosts, cleaning up the mess, collecting bullet casings as if they were seashells on a beach. They look at the floor, at the walls, anywhere but at the earthquake's epicenter. Me.

They took what is mine.

That phrase is an echo. A goddamn chorus in my head. They took the only thing in this fucked-up world that makes no sense. The only thing that makes me question if the control is real or just a joke.

Svetlana and Dmitry, with their spreadsheets and projections, will never understand that. He's an addiction. He's the stupid duck song that plays in your head in the middle of a board meeting. He's fucking insanity staring back at you with pale eyes and asking for more.

Dmitry arrives. Impeccable, as always, his gray suit without a single crease. He looks like an expensive watch ad that just walked onto the set of a massacre. He analyzes the destruction with a calmness that makes me want to vomit.

"A precise response is needed," he says quietly. "We need to identify the exact cell that did this. A broad retaliation exposes us to an all-out war. Are you hurt, Dante?"

I ignore him. "I don't want a retaliation, Dmitry, I want an *extermination*."

"Dante..."

"No," I cut him off. "They entered my territory. They hurt my men, stole my asset, and nobody fucking touches what is mine."

Dmitry stares at me.

"This is about the boy," he states.

The bastard. My younger brother. A fucking suit that costs more than a car. The infuriating calm of someone who solves everything with a phone call. Always him. Ever since we were kids and our father taught us that weakness was a contagious disease, Dmitry learned to read me.

I remember a meeting room in Prague, years ago. A deal with the Chinese triad that was souring. I was calm, with a trained smile and a voice of polished steel. But Dmitry saw it. He saw the way my thumb pressed against the whiskey glass, the tension in my jaw. He saw the violence

accumulating beneath the surface. Later that night, three members of the triad disappeared, and Dmitry just handed me a handkerchief to wipe the blood from my knuckles, without a word. He already knew.

He sees the same pattern now. The same disproportionate fury. The same readiness to burn the world down for an affront that, on paper, is just a business problem. There is no logic. There is no protection to be offered. There is only the boy. Dmitry knows. He can't categorize this, and that's why his gaze is so dangerous right now. He's trying to solve a problem that has no solution.

And the only answer I have is a lie I know he won't buy.

"This is about them breaking into my house," I lie.

The house is just concrete and marble. What they took has no walls. It breathes. And, for some sick reason, I need it back more than I need air.

It *is* about the boy. It has *always* been about the boy. From the moment I saw him on his knees in that warehouse, *hard* from his own abduction. The whole world has become a blur since then.

Svetlana sighs. She pinches the bridge of her nose as if that would rid her of this headache.

"I *warned* you, Dante," she says, bitterly. "I warned you not to get too involved."

"Don't start, Svetlana."

She approaches. That combative stance. I hate it.

"I saw how you looked at him. I saw the marks you left. He told me he *lives* for you, Dante," she says through gritted teeth, her hands pushing my shoulders in a barely contained fury. "This stopped being about an 'asset' a long time ago."

"Coming into *my* house and killing *my* men *is* personal!" I retort, raising my voice unintentionally. I need to drag the conversation back to the only territory that makes sense. "This is a fucking declaration of war. They spat in our faces and they need a response."

"And they'll *get* one," Svetlana agrees. And pauses. The acidity and harshness slowly fade, dissolving until only a fearful vulnerability remains on her face—an expression I haven't seen in a long time. "But I *know* that look, Dante," she whispers, and Dmitry, quiet, stiffens beside her. "Seeing not business, but an *affront*... And retaliating like *he* did... You *know*."

The comparison is worse than a blow. It's *dirty*.

My fucking father. The *bastard* who raised us surrounded by fear and hatred. A man who turned everything into a *debt*, everything into a *punishment*. And now she looks at me as if she sees his face in mine. As if I were... *him*.

My stomach turns. I fight it. Every *fucking* day, I fight to purge any remnant of him from me, and he creeps in closer with every moment.

Maybe he's getting *too* close.

"Don't compare me to him," I growl. The words come out low, through clenched teeth.

Svetlana doesn't back down. She and Dmitry have a shared understanding of old fear. They see it. They see our father's ghost in me.

Nyx, in some sick way, brought this monster to the surface. From day one.

"Dante." Dmitry's voice is low. An attempt to anchor the conversation, to pull us away from the precipice of this shitty legacy. "She didn't mean that."

"It doesn't matter now," Svetlana interrupts. She *did* mean every word she said. "What matters is that they have our most valuable and dangerous resource."

I force myself to breathe. *Control*. The Don *needs* to be in control.

I point at Svetlana. "I want the financial analysis. Every Malakov asset. Accounts, shell companies, investments." My gaze shifts to Dmitry. "And you, intelligence. If there are names we don't know yet, I want them. I want to know what time they take their trash out and the name of their children's pet dog. I want leverage."

They don't argue. They nod, back in their roles as Volkovs.

"And you?" Dmitry asks. With *concern*.

I walk towards the exit of the room, passing them, feeling their gazes on my back. I need air. I need something to *break*.

"I'll handle the street."

THE RAIN BEATS AGAINST THE ESCALADE'S ARMORED GLASS. THE CITY lights are just that: lights, blurs of color on the wet asphalt. Beside me, Grigory is quiet. In the front seat, two more men; in the back, three.

It's a procedure. A calculated response to a breach of protocol. The part of me that feels the loss of Nyx like a phantom limb is ignored—I force everything not relevant to the operation down.

The target is *Il Cigno Nero*. An Italian restaurant. One of the nodes in their money-laundering network. The architecture is neoclassical, a pretentious facade to hide the rot.

Other men are already in position nearby. I give the signal over the radio as soon as we arrive. One click.

The first sound is the shattering of the facade's glass. Chaos is a useful tool to mask the precision of the infiltration. They go in with crowbars and sledgehammers, with orders not to touch the customers, to target things. Tables, bottles, and the infrastructure of their luxury.

I get out of the car. Grigory and two of my best men follow. We cross the street under the flashing red lights and enter through the front door—or what's left of it. The wood is splintered, the hinges hanging like broken bones. The noise is deafening. Screams. Alarms. The sound of expensive wood splitting apart. The customers are cowering on the floor; the cooks have been dragged out of the kitchen and into the main dining room.

In the midst of the pandemonium, I see Vinny, the youngest of us, grabbing a civilian's arm—a man in a suit, trying to shield his wife with his body. Vinny yells at him, gripping the man's arm as if securing a target.

I don't slow my pace. I extend my arm as I pass him. I force Vinny's wrist down with a sharp twist.

The snap is clean. Cartilage giving way. His scream comes first from shock, then pain.

"If I have to correct you again, you won't have another hand left to use."

I release him. He stumbles back, swallowing a sob, trying to hide the tremor in his breath as he clutches his arm to his chest. He doesn't even try to talk back. Smart of him.

The civilian retreats with his wife still in his arms, unsure of what to do. He wasn't supposed to experience this. Neither of them.

I move on. I don't have time to babysit.

As I cross the room, our target Viktor Orlov's security guards finally appear. Too late. My men, who came in from the flanks, neutralize them with silent efficiency. The sound of the suppressors is almost lost in the noise of the destruction.

I head for the back kitchen. The smell of garlic and pork is suffocating. Viktor, member of the Malakovs, is there, held in a chair by two of my men, a chair he surely never even managed to get out of. Sweat is pouring down his face.

"Dante," Viktor says, his voice trying to be firm. "This is a mistake. We can talk."

Talk. We have done business together in the distant past. Peaceful business with a white façade, waiting for the moment to stab each other again.

I study him. The same arrogance I remember. This time, with *fear* underneath. For a second, a dirty, familiar thought crosses my mind: the urge to see that arrogance shatter, to hear the sound his bones would make. My father's voice, a rotten echo in the back of my mind, whispering about how pain is the only universal language.

"Where is he?" I ask.

Viktor swallows hard. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I sigh. I grab a steak knife from the table. Polished steel. I pull a chair up in front of him and sit, with Grigory at my back. "Let's talk like men, Viktor. I'll ask again: *where is he*?"

Viktor stays quiet. He looks at my men, notes that we're surrounded. He lets out a sound that betrays his desperation.

"I-It was an order from above, Dante. I… I had nothing to do with it," he stammers.

"Nobody ever has."

With a nod, my men grab him, forcing him against the table, knocking over glasses and plates. Porcelain shatters on the floor as one of them presses the barrel of a gun against Viktor's temple. I spin the steak knife between my fingers. Viktor breathes heavily. He spits out pleas in our native tongue.

"Dante. Dante. *Radi Boga, pozhaluysta, ya prosto rabotal, ya nichego ne znayu, Dante, pozhaluysta, umolyayu—*"

"It's always an order from above, isn't it, Viktor?" I interrupt his pathetic pleas.

He glares at me from the table, red from exertion and panic. "This is different, Dante. I'm a businessman. An accountant. I don't deal with… with *this kind* of field operation."

I lean in, the tip of the knife now lightly touching the skin of his cheek. He flinches. He can't go anywhere.

"Your family…" I say. "Your daughter, the one studying art in Florence… she has your smile. It would be a shame if her tuition funding were to dry up. Or if something were to happen to her. Florence is beautiful, but it can be a dangerous place for a girl living alone."

There it is. The pure, absolute terror blooms in his eyes. The businessman facade crumbles, and all that's left is a cornered animal. Family is something we all fear losing, no matter who is considered as such. If he knows anything about *my* asset's state, it's now he sings.

He starts to cry, spitting out more Russian words, begging for the love of God.

"*Ne nado, radi Boga, ne trogay yeyo*—"

I grab his swollen cheeks. I dig my fingers into the flesh until it hurts.

"I have a friend there," I say, leaning closer to that rancid breath. "Near her building. She likes to walk home late with her earbuds in, never looking up. And Florence is full of alleys."

"I don't know anything! I swear!" he exclaims. "I just—I just know it's a hacker, that's all! A-A man, a young man!"

I let go of his disgusting face. He cries Russian prayers. That Nyx is *a young man* is fucking useless information.

I crack my knuckles. Whether he knows more or not, we've come to do something *else* with his repugnant existence.

As I twirl the knife between my fingers, I hear a sound. Distant, but unmistakable. Sirens.

Viktor's eyes go wide. A glimmer of hope, pathetic and bright. Salvation. He looks from the kitchen door to the main room, almost smiling through his tears. The idiot.

The sirens get louder, stopping outside. I hear the voice of an older, tired man echo from one of my men's radios: "*I want a two-block perimeter! Nobody in, nobody out! Contain the civilians on the south corner for statements!*"

One of my men—Marco—at the entrance signals to me. *He's coming. Alone.*

Viktor doesn't see the signal. He only sees the silhouette of the detective entering the restaurant through the shattered door with his weapon drawn. For Viktor, the *cavalry* has arrived.

"Thank God, the police!" one of the cooks whispers from the dining room.

The detective enters. The place is a chaos of overturned tables and broken glass. Wealthy customers are huddled on the floor. My men, the ones who did the initial sweep, are standing like statues near the walls.

"NYPD! Nobody move!" the detective—Walsh—yells. His eyes scan the room and find mine, at the back, in the kitchen doorway. I don't move. I give him a slight nod. *Do what you have to do.*

Walsh acts. He points his gun at my men. "You two! Hands on your head! On your knees! Now!"

Marco and the other one look at me. They see my approval. Immediately, they obey, raising their hands and slowly kneeling. To the customers, it's a surrender.

Walsh walks with his gun still raised, past my kneeling men, and comes straight for the kitchen. He doesn't stop.

He steps into the kitchen, keeping his armed silhouette visible to my men, and gets close enough for the wall to hide him from the civilians. He leans in toward me.

"Dante, what the fuck is this?" he whispers. "I said I'd hold off patrol for ten minutes, not that you could demolish the place."

I don't look away from Viktor when I answer. "There was a rat infestation. Business, Detective."

The smile of relief on Viktor's face wilts. He looks from me to the detective, from the detective back to me, and his chin trembles. He understands. The cop isn't arresting me. He's complaining about the paperwork.

"Five minutes, Dante," Walsh says, eyeing Viktor with disgust. "After that, my men are coming in, and the scene has to be consistent with the story." He turns back to the kitchen door and puts his mask of authority back on, yelling to the dining room, "You two, on your feet! Slow! Hands on your heads! Get in the kitchen, move!"

While Walsh puts on his show, I turn back to Viktor. The man is broken. There are no more pleas, no more bargaining. This is the end.

I ignore the detective's voice in the background. *Viktor.*

"Hang him," I say.

The men who were holding Viktor in the chair pull him up, his expensive shoes making a pathetic, greasy scraping sound on the floor. He's

a dead weight, resigned.

In the background, I hear Walsh's theater continue. My men who were "surrendering" in the main room enter the kitchen with their hands on their heads as Walsh closes what's left of the door behind them.

"Go through the back," he whispers to them. "Disappear. Now."

The remaining men secure Viktor on the meat hook. The steel tears through the expensive fabric of his suit and lodges in his flesh. A low, guttural groan escapes his throat as his feet leave the floor. His sweaty carcass hangs there. A message.

I step closer. The smell of his sour sweat is nauseating.

"You took something of mine. I cripple something of yours."

I open the side of his throat with that same steak knife—a cut long and shallow enough not to kill him immediately. His body thrashes on the hook, and the scream dies before it's born, drowned in its own collapse.

"That's for my men."

I take a step back. The monstrous thing inherited from my father stirs. It likes this. It would enjoy letting him agonize while it breaks other parts of his body.

I don't.

I look around the kitchen—Walsh is already gone, and Grigory, who has been silent behind me the whole time, steps closer.

"Grigory," I say.

That's all it takes. He draws his weapon, the suppressor already in place. A muffled pop, and Viktor's head hangs limp.

I wipe the knife on the tablecloth.

"Leave him there," I command. "The house special."

I walk out the back. I can hear Walsh mumbling outside, behind the police tape, talking to other uniformed officers. Looking in every respect like the detective in charge of a horrific crime scene.

I find the men from the dining room by the Escalade, two blocks down.

"If it weren't for you, boss, that rat in a suit would be in the trunk by now," Marco says, lighting a cigarette as he gets in the car.

I do the same, and the others follow. Nobody really likes working with cops.

"The little State detective thinks he's in charge," another complains.

"A pig is a pig," Vinny, who has been quiet since the restaurant, mutters under his breath, holding his wrist against his chest.

Marco hits the gas. Grigory, in the front seat, looks at me in the rearview mirror, nervous. He can sense it's not a good day to bust my balls, and he's waiting for my reaction. But I don't say anything about Walsh. Walsh is nothing more than an expensive, annoying tool.

Vinny tries to adjust his arm in the back seat without making a sound. He fails. A low groan, almost a hiss, escapes as he moves.

The car falls silent. Everyone hears it.

I see his reflection in the rearview mirror, in the back seats.

"How's the wrist, Vinny?" I say.

Grigory glances at me in the mirror again. Marco turns to face the window.

Vinny swallows hard. Everyone's eyes flicker to him.

"I... I think it's broken, boss," he stammers, his voice like a boy who just took a ball to the face and is holding back tears. He's probably expecting an order to go to our doctor, maybe a twisted word of comfort. He's too young. He doesn't understand yet.

I take a drag from my cigarette. Dunhill. *Nyx*.

"Good," I say.

Vinny doesn't reply.

The itch under my skin returns. I see Vinny flinch. It's stronger now. *Nyx*. His eyes never leave the inside of my eyelids. Nyx, away from me.

We still have nothing concrete. Just a body hanging like a side of beef.

Nyx.

That he's scared right now is unlikely. He's not afraid of a fucking thing. Bored, maybe. Thrown in some dusty basement with nothing to do, or getting beaten, taking hits for not knowing how to shut his fucking mouth. And I will kill anyone who lays a finger on him with my own two hands.

Nyx. In pain? Beaten, forced into some unknown place. Or *turned on?*

I clench my fists. The mere thought makes me want to *destroy* someone, to go back to that restaurant, dismember every one of Viktor's organs and make Walsh regret selling himself to someone so inhuman. Nyx gets off on danger, on threats. Would he be barking back at the head of the Malakovs? Moaning for a punch, working for *them* now?

I crush the cigarette. It's a reflex. The men beside me shrink away, trying to give me space.

And what if, *right now*, he's swearing some sick love to someone else? Someone who gives in to the opportunistic violence he begs for, *more* than I

do. Fuck. *Fuck*.

"Faster, Marco," I order through gritted teeth. Marco speeds up, pushing past the speed limit, and I see the tension in his shoulders.

No. We haven't had any cyberattacks, nothing to alert us or imply that Nyx has turned against us. But he *could* do it. I know he could. Attack without being detected. With one order, one well-placed fucking pull of his hair, he'd do it, *moaning*.

"Boss?" one of my men calls out. There's a hint of concern in his voice, and I notice an intrusive, angry tremor in my fists. A tremor demanding an unmeasured, inherited violence. My father's ghost in the backseat, smiling at me.

Disgusting.

"Shut up, Boris."

He clears his throat and falls silent.

I focus on the blurs of the city sliding past the windows. New York. *Nyx's* fucking city.

I can't stand still for a second. I can't allow enough empty space in my head for that voice to echo, spitting memories of Nyx on his knees, repeating endlessly, *he belongs to anyone with a firm hand.*

I have to prove him wrong.

This illogical hurricane destroys the structure I've built. Is he even *alive*, in the first place? Or is he so insolent that he provoked them until he got a bullet in the head? He's too useful; if he's dead at the hands of the Malakovs, it would be an act of *monumental* stupidity. Getting rid of him is getting rid of an asset that dismantles empires for fun.

And, instead of treating it like a matter of logical probability, all these possibilities make my blood boil to the point of burning through every artery, bone, and muscle in my body. It's an ugly anger. An anger that only *he* can ignite.

I pull my phone from my pocket. Vibrating, incessant, is Svetlana's name on the screen.

I answer. Grigory is on alert. He's waiting for me to kill everyone in this car.

"*Dante*," she says. "*The security systems were disabled at the moment of the attack. Alpha-level access codes, used in a five-minute window to create a complete blind spot on the entire west perimeter.*"

Of course the attack began as internal. They couldn't have gotten through without inside help. I squeeze the phone. The plastic groans.

"*Luca also reported back. Sal's wife and kids were home. They said he left for work and never came back. We've moved them to one of our compounds in Queens under constant surveillance. They're terrified.*"

I hate this.

Sal's family isn't involved. They aren't part of the business, and they don't know anything—we take family background checks on all our direct associates. I know his kids' names, the school they attend, their trusted hospital. Family names are for *threats*, for pulling information from those with something to lose. But *this*.

Making a clean getaway would mean taking your family with you. Either that, or Sal is a different kind of son of a bitch than I thought. This is forcing my hand.

"Keep the family isolated," I say, swallowing the rising hatred. It leaks into the undertones of my voice. I taste iron. "No contact with the outside. If Sal tries to call any of them, I want it intercepted before they even answer."

"*We will. We're also accessing everyone who had alpha-level clearance.*"

"Go through everyone's life."

"*We will.*"

I hang up. This retaliation against the Malakovs is too personal to let anyone involved walk away with all their limbs intact. *Nyx* is too dangerous, and he is, above all, *mine*, and I'm willing to burn the *whole board down* to find him.

THE MALAKOVS' LARGEST SMUGGLING DISTRIBUTION CENTER ON THE EAST Coast has been set on fire. The nearby hydrants were sabotaged hours before, ensuring the firefighters would arrive only to watch a spectacle of total loss. The heart of the Malakovs' territory in Brighton Beach was invaded, its manager had his knees broken in front of everyone, the safe was emptied, and the walls were tagged with his blood. The car of the Malakovs' chief accountant was found intact with its doors open, the man

himself vanished. The transportation company they used as a front had twelve trucks sabotaged in the same night with slashed tires, punctured gas tanks, and sugar-filled engines.

Svetlana identified Krestol Holdings, a publicly traded company that served as the Malakovs' main "clean" front. She initiated a massive, coordinated sell-off of shares, along with the leak of an anonymous rumor about an "imminent federal investigation." The panic sent the stock plummeting 30% before lunch.

Using contacts in Swiss and Cayman Islands banks, we raised red flags on two of the Malakovs' main offshore accounts, freezing millions in liquid assets. The head of the port union, a chemical supplier, and a local politician partnered with the Malakovs received visits from us, and their contracts were suddenly canceled.

I haven't slept since Nyx disappeared. I coordinate operations, messages; I search for clues. The local news with stock quotes and city maps marked with Malakov properties bring me no relief. This is the easy part. Dismembering. Making logical connections.

"The value has plummeted fifteen percent in the last hour," Dmitry says to Svetlana on the phone.

The penthouse of one of our hotels has been transformed into a well-equipped base while the mansion we used with Nyx is being turned inside out. We've reinforced the security at all our locations and are waiting for a response worthy of the Malakovs—*if* they can recover from our attacks. They have to use Nyx at some point. He would be their only ace.

I watch Dmitry report the results to Svetlana. Financial and territorial blows, for entering our territory. He fits in well in this sterile, clean, methodical office. It almost sounds impersonal.

I bring a cigarette to my lips in a failed attempt to calm myself. To stop looking at the windows and remembering that he could be anywhere.

Dmitry hangs up the phone. He pulls a short stack of documents from the corner of the desk. "The first wave of attacks was successful. The Malakovs are trying to move their funds," he says.

I nod. I push myself off the wall and cross the bland rug in the center of the room. I was only here to listen to the update, hoping that, somehow, impersonal financial attacks could give us any hint of where Nyx is.

Millions of dollars in damages, blood from various hierarchical positions, the ashes of their control points, and we still have nothing. No

one knows anything, no one says anything relevant.

I need to keep searching.

"Dante," Dmitry calls out before I reach the door. "Wait."

And I know where this is going.

Dmitry always softens his voice before he *tries*.

I turn around. I don't have the patience to play house right now, not with Nyx loose and away from me out there.

"What Sveta said earlier..." he continues, hesitant, "...about you and the boy. Is it true?"

What she said. Her words flash in my mind. *This stopped being about an asset a long time ago.*

Dmitry knows *something* is going on. He knows me, as much as I hate it, but he wasn't as close as Svetlana was at the mansion. He didn't address Nyx, didn't see him, and spent the same period that Svetlana was yelling at me to stay away from Nyx consuming reports from guards who aren't permitted to mention any of the Volkovs' personal matters.

I prefer it this way. I prefer that Dmitry doesn't know. A part of me fears he could unravel whatever the fuck exists between me and Nyx, that he could witness the monstrosity that Nyx pulls out of me. I can handle Svetlana's confusion. But it shames me for my siblings to witness, with clarity, that I *use* that sick boy as a lightning rod for all the shit I've inherited—that unloading that hatred onto him is the only thing that makes the noise stop. The impulse. The violence. Even if only for a second.

And that, from somewhere inside me, I *like* doing it. *Unloading*. That's the sickest part of it all. Nyx welcomes this despicable monster, and it grows quiet.

Svetlana fears the shadow. I can control that. But Dmitry could *understand* this disgusting symbiosis. And what a shame that would be.

"Sveta sees what she chooses to see," I say. I seek cover in her stubbornness, which we both know all too well.

"I don't know," he insists. "She works with evidence. She said the boy... *lives* for you? That sounds... intimate."

It irritates me how calm he always is. Svetlana, at least, would be armed with a passive-aggressiveness that would give me something to aim at.

Dmitry only gives me this: an unperturbed patience.

He fiddles with the contract sheets. Aligns them on the desk. Says, into my silence, "Have you slept? Since the attack."

I clench my jaw. He's cornering me—the lie that dies in my throat gives me away.

"Vinny needed surgery. You broke his wrist in three places," he continues. I clench my fist tighter. "You've always had a firm hand. I respect that. But I saw the reports. I need to know... the size of the risk."

A firm hand. That's what my father used to crush Mikhail Malakov's first attempt to expand to our side of the river, twenty years ago. A war that lasted two years and filled the East River with their bodies. Mikhail's sons never forgave. Neither did we. This isn't a new war. It's just the next chapter of the same carnage.

"What are you implying?" I say through gritted teeth. The threatening tone is automatic, instinctive. Dmitry is unaffected by it.

"Sleep with whoever you want. But I can't quantify this if I don't know what's really happening. Is he a weakness?"

Weakness is an intrusive word in this context. A skinny boy with a death wish—a *weakness*. It's almost an insult.

"You don't understand," I say, looking away from him. I can feel his eyes on me.

"Try me."

I don't want to say it. I can't even *vocalize* the effect Nyx has on me.

"Not even *I* understand it," I say. My voice comes out low, refusing to admit the truth.

He looks at me. And, somehow, this answer, this declared defeat, is enough for him.

"Right," he says and nods. "I can work with that." He looks back down at his papers, as if the matter is closed. "If he's still alive, we'll find him. We always do."

If.

Before I can respond, there's a knock on the door. I tense up, slipping back into a leadership role as Luca's voice sounds out.

"Excuse me."

He opens the door slowly. The only thing that might betray his recent injury is a slightly stiff arm.

"Speak," I say. I take a drag to cleanse myself of this nauseating conversation and Dmitry's all-too-knowing understanding.

"Mrs. Coleman doesn't know anything," he says, bluntly. Sal's wife. "The kids are scared. We're not getting anything from them."

I sigh. Dmitry notices the tension returning to every muscle in my body and hurries to ask before I do, "And Sal?"

"We're turning everything upside down, but we've found nothing. IT also says his online activity is clean."

No lead from the family. No digital trail. Just another dead end.

I slam my fist against the wall. The vibration freezes Luca on alert; I feel Dmitry prepare to stand up.

I'm not one inch closer to finding Nyx.

I look at the screens, at the papers, at the faces of my brother and my soldier, and all I see are dead ends. I can't breathe in here anymore.

"Donya..." Dmitry starts, but I raise a hand to silence him.

Without another word, I leave.

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NINETEEN

LEO

BEING KIDNAPPED ISN'T as fun the second time.

Externally, it doesn't make much difference. A warehouse with a gray, stained floor, with dried blood in the corners and an ugly layer of dust. A place that's huge and claustrophobic at the same time. Big, muscular men guarding the doors. Distant, on the other side of the wall. Silence, with the lights out, and a prolonged solitude designed to dissociate you from reality and lower your resistance before a real interrogation begins.

The reduction of sensory stimuli affects the limbic system. The prefrontal cortex is inhibited. Heart rate, blood pressure, and glucose levels rise. This technique has been used before. The CIA, the KGB, criminals of any size who have seen an action movie. Not in that order. It's scientifically based.

The problem is that my hippocampus has been atrophied by years of excess cortisol. The adrenaline doesn't come. This doesn't work on me.

It is, at most, tedious.

I don't know how much time passes. I don't know where I am. Sometimes, I hear distant conversations from guards who think they're speaking quietly. They appear in a crescendo and disappear in a decrescendo.

I cling to that. Clues that tell me what's happening beyond the obvious —Sal willingly opened the doors for the Malakovs. Sal, the little chicken who faints if Dante breathes a little louder than normal. I need to deliver the

results of those analyses; I promised Svetlana I'd deliver them on the same day. But *is* it the same day? I don't know how long I was out, and I don't know how long I've been here, listening to guards complain about abusive hours and a nervous boss. Hours, for sure. Days? I don't know.

"...he hung him on a meat hook," says a passing voice from a nearby corridor. "Viktor Orlov."

"I don't believe it," says another voice.

"I saw the pictures. The boss is pissed..."

A familiar name. *Viktor Orlov*. One of the Malakovs' chief accountants, a cousin of one of the big bosses. I've strengthened encryption for him in the past.

They're scattered comments. They talk a lot about Viktor. Hung like butchered meat. They talk about the stock market. Assets. A fire somewhere. Things seem ugly out there.

But, as always, my body only reacts to *one* name.

"...they're saying Dante Volkov himself is on the street," says a lost whisper, and just the sound of his name brings me warmth. "Tearing through all the important guys. They hired security for Sergei..."

Sergei. Viktor's brother, or something like that.

I think about it. Was it Dante who hung a Malakov accountant on a meat hook?

"...all this for some IT guy?"

"I told them not to invade that mansion. I think it was because of it."

Laughable. Dante is a territorial man, but a mansion is just a set of bricks. He, above all, knows this.

I don't know how much I can believe a scared whisper in a hallway. But this is good. Dante burning the world, hanging idiots in suits on meat hooks for an IT guy. A good result for my work. The Volkovs are right to fear losing the one who fixes their cybernetic weaknesses. They know what I can do.

And, as much as a computer is what makes me objectively indispensable to them, the idea of a world in flames just because Dante *wants me* burns my nerve endings.

At some point, a metallic noise pulls me out of my head. My eyes—photophobic—burn with the light, coming in saturated beams. I see two silhouettes. A muscular, large man; and a slender, older man, wearing an expensive suit. High-ranking and a brute. How fun.

They approach slowly. The goon closes the door, and I feel his curiosity on me. When he speaks, it's in a coarse, raspy voice of someone who drinks too much.

"Is this the famous *Nyx*?" he says, savoring the name. "What a disappointment. I was expecting a hot blonde."

Original. Nothing I haven't heard three dozen times before. The man in the suit ignores the comment. He stops in front of me, keeping the distance of someone who doesn't think I'm worth any proximity. "Leonel Hays," he says. Unlike the big guy, his voice is clear. "Or do you prefer Nyx?"

He pauses, but doesn't wait for me to answer.

"It's a shame our first meeting outside of a screen is like this. Your work for us in the past was impeccable. The Volkovs are setting fire to everything out there for you, creating hell on earth. You must feel important."

Dante wouldn't let them enter his house and take something of his. That's obvious.

The big guy doesn't stop walking toward me. He crouches down and grabs my chin with calloused, swollen fingers. He squeezes, forcing my torso up.

"Important or just *well-used*? You're all marked up," he laughs, forcing my face to the side. He sees the bruises as a joke. "And it's not just from punches, is it, *sweet thing*?" He pushes his thumb into a purplish circle—next to the bite marks. *Dante's* marks. "Does he bite you when he's fucking you, little whore? You must moan real nice."

That wording doesn't cause me any shame. I swallow my disgust—he smells of putrid intoxication—and give him a smile, letting him hold my face however he wants. "Want to hear? Hit me hard enough and maybe I'll show you."

He didn't expect that reaction, but he recovers well. He analyzes the marks on my face. I bite my lip for him, and he looks down at my groin. His synapses don't work well enough to understand that I'm not turned on.

"You like a beating to open your legs, is that it?" he says, torn between a fantastical, pornographic excitement and hatred for my courage. He doesn't let go of my face. Dante would hold on tighter.

I peek at the older man in the suit. I say, before he can interfere, "I said *hard enough.* I doubt you could get close to what he does."

This is predictable. A brute who gets offended at the possibility of not being the strongest *Homo sapiens* in history. A man who takes a sexual

comparison with another man straight to his dick, to his chromosomes, to his testosterone. To the certainty of who he is. He gets pissed.

"You little motherfucker," he says.

He grabs my collar and pulls me up. He throws a punch at my face. A direct trauma to my nose, from the side, enough to displace the straight line of the bridge—I feel my septum crack, my breathing converted to asymmetry. I was right: this punch would be too light to affect my jaw. My molars would hold. Dante, on the other hand, shattered them.

What a joke.

I spit on the floor without thinking. A reflex with a metallic taste.

"The other guy hit harder," I say. I can't even hide the contempt.

The brute roars with hatred. I peek at the boss—a *voyeur* of violence, watching his man about to beat a hostage, until he finally speaks.

"Enough."

The brute, disgruntled, is at least obedient. He lets me go reluctantly. He takes a step back, moves closer to his boss, like a puppy. As if he needed his leash pulled to stop him from pouncing on a piece of steak. How cute.

The boss approaches. He tilts his head, analyzing me. His curiosity has a clinical pragmatism. He says, "You're not afraid of pain?"

I let my head rest back on the floor. I see him perfectly, looming above me. I give him a crooked smile. "It's just sensory information."

He nods, calm. "Our intelligence noticed an interesting development. The tech company where you work was recently acquired. A rushed transaction, for a price well above market value. By a holding company that, if you dig deep enough, has the scent of the Volkovs. Is that how he controls you, Leonel? With the threat of destroying your civilian life?"

What a pathetic impression. I let out a laugh at the ridiculousness of it. "Threats only work if you have something to lose... I'm sorry, you haven't introduced yourself yet. What should I call you?"

He raises an eyebrow. His brute clenches his fists, surely seeing my question as proof of narcissistic insubordination.

The boss forces a rehearsed smile. "Alexei. Alexei Malakov."

Alexei Malakov. One of the heads of the family's operations. As I recall from past investigations, he's the weight of gold safely kept in a vault.

I know the Malakovs' structure. I've worked for them before, through layers of encryption and anonymous servers. Never in person. They're different from the Volkovs. The Volkovs are a trinity. Three points of a

spear, where power is concentrated and decisions are swift and usually unanimous, ever since the heart attack that put Kazimir Volkov in a coffin.

Underworld legend says that old Mikhail Malakov and the Volkovs' father, Kazimir Volkov, arrived in New York on the same ship, fleeing the collapse of the Soviet Union. Partners, at first. Until old man Volkov proved to be the stronger predator and took the bigger slice of the pie. The history of the Bratva is always the same: Cain and Abel with more vodka and less forgiveness. Since then, the Malakovs have been waiting for a chance to rebalance the scales: they are a litter. A sprawling family, full of cousins, uncles, and nephews, all gnawing on the same piece of rotten cheese. More numerous, but with diluted power. More people means more egos, more betrayals, more incompetence.

At the top of it all, invisible, is the old czar Mikhail Malakov, the patriarch who hasn't been seen in public for years, but whose word is still law. Below him, the family splits into two heads who hate each other. The first head is brute force: Ivan Malakov. Alexei's cousin. The Malakov of the docks, of the containers, of street brawls. He's the public face of their violence. Primitive, loud, and effective in his own way, with no finesse. The kidnapping of an asset like me has the look of one of his plays. Direct and stupid.

The second head is intelligence: Alexei Malakov. The brain. The Malakov in a tie, of Swiss banks, of holding companies. He's the one who makes the empire profitable, and he's the man I've provided services for in the past.

And Viktor Orlov... the accountant the guards were whining about earlier. He wasn't a Malakov by name, but he was Alexei's cousin on his mother's side, I think. One of his most trusted lieutenants, the man who handled the logistics of their dirty money.

Dante aimed for the money. Alexei is either trying to acquire me as a replacement piece or trying to get rid of me.

I smile back at him.

"I'm sorry about your cousin."

Alexei doesn't let much show. The frown is slight, superior. He tilts his chin.

I explain, "The walls are thin here."

I wait. He gestures for his brute not to attack me again—he's frothing for his boss, as if he were a Malakov himself. An obvious, dumb goon.

Alexei raises an index finger at me. He says, with a calm stained with caution, "You're dangerous, Nyx. I came here to offer a contract to a hacker, but clearly, what I have in front of me is much more than that. So, let's be direct. What does Dante Volkov offer you that keeps you loyal?"

He must think that if Dante doesn't have something against me, then he's paying me an exorbitant amount. And he is, just not with money.

"I don't think you can afford it, Mr. Malakov. With all due respect."

He, unlike his rage-red brute, doesn't seem offended. "Try me. Give me a number, and we'll talk."

"I think we got off on the wrong foot," I say. I draw out the subject on purpose. "You could have just sent me a contract by email. This whole conversation is illusory. The fact that I'm tied up here with a broken nose is a bit crude for a professional proposal, don't you think? Let's be *truly* direct, Mr. Malakov—what do *you* need me to do that I'll die if I don't?"

Alexei is quiet. The brute stares at him, waiting for the order to kill me. It doesn't come. The professional, rehearsed smile Alexei showed me earlier is now real, reaching his eyes almost shyly. It's not used to appearing.

"Straight to the point," he says. "Alright, Leonel. No more illusions." He turns to the brute. The order Alexei gives is a little different from what his goon wanted to hear. "Take him to the terminal and untie his right hand."

With an offended and disgusted grimace, the brute approaches me. He lifts me up forcefully and with no care at all.

"The task is simple," says Alexei Malakov. "We have a data package that our insider provided us. It's well-encrypted—*your* work, perhaps. But we need what's inside, and you are going to decrypt it for us. If you don't, my men will have permission to do whatever they want with you, for as long as they want. Am I direct enough for you?"

I force myself to stay on my feet as the brute squeezes my arm, pulling me up. I prefer this Alexei.

"Yes, Mr. Malakov. Let's keep our communication on this level," I say, ignoring the latency in my muscles.

The goon drags me toward the door while Alexei remains on his mountain of control, watching us.

The last thing I see in this warehouse is Alexei, with a forced smile and a cynical wave.

THE TERMINAL IS A SANDBOX. THE CAMERA BLINKS. I'M BEING WATCHED, the screen likely recorded, and keystrokes detected. No internet access beyond a few public sites, with basic compilation tools and hexadecimal editors.

I check the files provided by Alexei. Stolen from the Volkovs. It's my protocol—a favor for someone in IT that Svetlana authorized. I was the one who set up this system, and only I could dismantle it. I made sure of that.

I look at the file compression—definitely Sal's work. Satisfactory, not great. Breadcrumbs everywhere.

This protocol was developed with my continued survival, based on being necessary to the Volkovs, in mind. A calculation with seemingly random, mutable data, updated every twenty-four hours. An automated and obscure process. Nothing could discover a decryption key if there was no entry point. Lucky for them they have me here. I'm the only one who knows what those *seemingly random* data points used in the key calculation are.

That's for last. I need to think about what to do to complete the unfinished business I have with the Volkovs: the rat.

I don't have my address or any information that could be useful to them beyond this. If they suspect Sal, it's unlikely they have confirmation—the data I managed to get before I was taken was intentionally encrypted, and they couldn't access it on their own. Just another guarantee to be necessary, but it bit me in the ass this time. If they knew, it would make things easier now. Never mind. I'll give them a confirmation even from here.

Being monitored, I can't write a malicious script in plain sight. They'd kill me before I could finish. I can't create a technical machination that would reach Dante if I'm not by his side now to translate it. I need something that can be masked, that the IT team monitoring activities on this computer will see as an idiot trying to crack encryption, and that will end up on the Volkov leaders' desk instead of the incompetent technicians' desk.

I think about money. The only thing that bypasses doormats and reaches leaders. Profit. The casinos in Atlantic City. I reinforced the payment protocols. I know the alerts. If I make slot machines trigger impossible sequences, the alert will flag a bizarre glitch that needs to be investigated. A message with that. But how do I say the rat is Sal?

I open multiple terminal windows. I need them to see some service running. I run useless brute-force scripts that don't give me access to the decryption key. I analyze the network, looking for ports I know are closed.

I open a hexadecimal editor. I know this language by heart. Nothing will trigger alerts if I create code in machine language and not ours. But I need a plausible justification. The last thing I want is a bullet in the head before I finish this job.

I open the encrypted data in the hexadecimal editor, open that wall of useless characters that say nothing. I pretend to analyze them.

Now, I need to truly decrypt the files: the key I made is a bit ridiculous and absurd. The previous day's closing price of a small, almost unknown tech company stock on the NASDAQ—within the limited accessible sites on the network. Yesterday, it closed at $42.81. The first ingredient is the cents. Then the daily NASA SDO solar activity report. Public data. I check. Yesterday's report recorded 15 sunspots. The rest is in my memory.

Today's daily key calculation uses 81 and 15—together in a single number, 8115. This number is multiplied by the prime number equivalent to the result of a round base number, 2000, added to today's day and subtracted from the month. July 15th. Result 2008. My base number is 2000 because I memorized the thousandth prime numbers as a child to impress the only teacher who treated me like a person; the 2000th is 17389. Primes are irregular, but not so much in this range. Patterns ending in 1, 3, 7, and 9. I need the 2008th.

Near 17389... 17393. Yes. Prime. One. 17401, two. 17409... No. Divisible by three. 17411, 17413, no. 17417... yes. Three. 17419. Four. 17431, five. 17443... six. 17449. Seven. 17467... eight. There it is. Two hundred eighth. 17467. That's it.

Now, a simple multiplication. My public numbers, 8115, multiplied by 17467. That gives 141744705. I run it through a SHA-256 hash. It returns the key for the day.

This took me one minute. Work that would take them months.

I open a text editor. I create a configuration file, full of technical jargon to keep them bored. Algorithm=AES-256, Padding=PKCS7... And then, in the middle of it all, the line: Key=.... The key. I save the file. I run the decryptor, pointing it to my configuration. They see the key that opens today's door, but they have no idea where the door leads, nor how to open tomorrow's.

The files unravel. Completely decrypted.

I pretend to analyze them. I don't care what they actually are. I open a decrypted image file in the hexadecimal editor. I can justify this as fixing a

file with a corrupted header. I start my real work.

There's no point in writing code that attacks the system now. This machine has limited connections, and any visible changes will raise red flags. I need dormant code that waits for an accessible port and attacks through it. The results I get will probably be opened on the Malakov network after I transfer them to the USB the brute gave me, so I write the hexadecimal script programmed for that.

Pretending to fix the corrupted file, I target three specific slot machines. **S**iberian Storm, **A**ce's Ant, and **L**ucky Loot. S.A.L., three times, in that order, so they know it's not a mistake.

Once a system is detected, the script will awaken. I save it as part of the decrypted image file—it was a graphic or something. Now it's a time bomb.

I turn to the henchman. Typing all this with one hand was a pain and a waste of time. It's funny they think I could do anything against a brute with my physique.

"I'm done, handsome," I taunt. He grinds his teeth. He definitely has orders not to kill me.

I take the disk from the machine and hand it to him.

"You should stay quiet, princess," he grumbles.

The henchman grabs my arm tightly and pulls me up from the chair. He forces my right hand back, putting my wrists together again.

"Oh yeah? I thought you wanted to hear me moan..."

He squeezes my wrists together and gets close behind me. He says in my ear, "You're lucky the boss wants you alive, you faggot."

He pulls me out of the terminal room.

He gives the disk to a guard outside and drags me down the same path he brought me: a long, gray, dirty corridor, full of rows of doors on the walls.

Near the end is the metal door with the highest security and most locks. The place we came from. He shoves me inside. The concrete scrapes my skin under my clothes.

He approaches. He crouches beside me, pulls the collar of my shirt. Brings his disgusting face close to mine. Rotten smell. "You'll beg me to stop when the boss isn't looking, you cheap whore."

He lets go. Before I can answer, he kicks my abdomen. My diaphragm spasms. It's hard to breathe for the time he turns his back and leaves,

closing and locking the door, drowning me again in an almost comfortable darkness.

It's funny. If Dante said that, it would be an aphrodisiac. *Dante*. He could call me anything he wanted. I like him to curse me, threaten me. But here, with this putrid-smelling guy, I only feel disgust. The blows don't give me pleasure. His hatred is so automatic and impersonal—it's miles away from how passionate Dante's hands are.

Maybe this, Alexei and this guy, would have excited me before, if it was the first time. Chemically, who knows. Before Dante. I have a comparison now.

It's hard to beat that.

THE DOOR OPENS. A FEW HOURS LATER, PERHAPS. THE BRIGHT LIGHT BLINDS me, and I hear hurried footsteps and low voices. Alexei Malakov returns, accompanied by three other men and a metal chair.

The same brute who kicked me earlier approaches. He pulls me from the floor and drags me to the newly placed chair. My wrists are still tied, and every movement sends searing pain from my wrist and ribs.

I sit down. The metal is cold against my skin. My back aches, but I lift my head, forcing a smile. "How kind," I provoke, looking directly at the brute. As soon as he finishes adjusting me and steps away, I blow him a kiss. Playing with fire. He wants to kill me.

The brute's neck muscles pulse. Looks like they're about to explode. His fists clench, and he takes a step forward, but a chilling look from Alexei stops him. His rage is obvious, and I revel in it. Even trapped, I still have control over something. A henchman's fragile masculinity.

"My analysts confirmed. The data you gave us is legitimate. You fulfilled your part," Alexei says. This means my dormant script has already done its job.

The brute returns to his side, and I rest my back against the metal. It's uncomfortable, but having something to support my torso is appreciated.

"Meanwhile, Dante Volkov was out there, setting my empire on fire," Alexei continues. "Warehouses, stocks, men... he's trying to erase the Malakov name from the map. This isn't retaliation. It's disproportionate."

"Dante is a passionate man, sir," I say with a crooked smile, remembering Luca's words about him one day. *Passionate*. He must be furious.

"Of that, I have no doubt. A man who inspires that kind of fury in someone as powerful as a Volkov is a nuclear bait. Personally, I have no interest in holding you when they come for you. They cut one of our men into seven pieces. I received the images half an hour ago." The only thing that betrays his humanity is, again, a slight, almost imperceptible frown. He doesn't like how much Dante is escalating this. He doesn't think it's worth it. "Therefore, Leonel, we appreciate your primary service. You are a very skilled hacker. But, in response to the Volkovs, we are going to transfer you. Do you know Ivan Malakov? Very welcoming to new inmates."

He gives me a smile. It's genuine. It's *strange*.

Ivan. His cousin, the brute. The conversation about values... the plan wasn't to recruit me. He just wanted to know if I was a controllable asset or a ticking time bomb.

"Ivan?" I repeat, savoring the sound of the name.

Alexei nods. He's calm, very pleased with what he's doing. "He would love your services. You seem to be Dante Volkov's favorite toy. That, in itself, makes you an interesting gift."

He turns to the brutes. Gives orders. Transfer. The dumber brute—the one who kicked me—is confused about the reason for the transfer. He doesn't understand.

Alexei measured Dante's obsession. In the first hours or days I was alone here. He watched everything burn. He used my unique service for internal encryption and threw the bait into his internal rival's yard.

While Dante and Ivan destroyed each other, Alexei would retreat to count his money and wait to pick up the pieces. I admit it, Alexei Malakov. A brilliant plan. Dante would destroy Ivan Malakov regardless of what he did to me, and Alexei wouldn't get his hands dirty. In the best and most likely scenario, he would kill me before Dante arrived. Likely. Ivan doesn't have a gentle reputation.

I laugh. It escapes without wanting to. It's funny to think I'm stuck in this idiotic war between two Malakovs trying to destroy each other. It's obvious that Dante's name is synonymous with a violent death for them. Alexei is pulling his cards out of the game because he knows he would lose if he didn't.

The henchmen look at me. Confused. Alexei doesn't care about my laughter.

I watch Alexei leave, giving orders. "Clean up the mess. Call Ivan's assistant, inform them we have a package for them. They will send discreet transport. Do not make the transfer until the designated van arrives. I want nothing more to do with this matter."

He doesn't look back. He leaves, adjusting the lapels of his suit, withdrawing from the board after sacrificing a piece to corner two kings. With him goes the only strategic intelligence in this room.

The dumb brute transforms confusion into bitter resentment. I'm still amused. He isn't.

"Whore," he spits in my direction. Then, he says to another guard, "Keep an eye on him. I'll make the call. We'll see if he's still laughing when he gets to Ivan's compound."

So that's it. He leaves me with two other watchdogs. A transfer. That means time. Minutes? Hours?

I feel a nervousness I haven't felt in many years. I have a certainty in the back of my mind that Ivan will kill me at the first provocation. A man who does not accept any kind of insubordination without consequences of death. These are rumors. But if Alexei is sending me to him, it's because the rumors are partly true. I can play with strategy. Not with impulse.

Let's see who arrives first, Dante. I hope it's you.

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TWENTY

DANTE

"Last chance, Sergei," I say.

Sergei Orlov is tied to a steel chair, and he knows nothing. He's the third Malakov lieutenant we've interrogated in the last 24 hours. They all sing the same song: "It was an order from above," "I don't know where the boy is." Dead ends, one after another. The only thing that minimally restrains me is the pleasure of making them regret what they did.

Grigory is in the corner of the room, wiping a bloody knife. Luca is guarding the door, one hand resting on his holster.

Sergei knows he's going to die. His face is busted. He's spat out more than three teeth since we started, and a pool of blood is forming within his irises towards the center of his pupils. He squints at me. He must be seeing a red blur.

"All this war... all this death... for a boy?" he says, spitting a gush of blood onto the floor. "You're shedding too much blood. You killed my brother. A good man. All for him?"

I don't react. He laughs a gurgling sound.

"His blowjob must be worth gold to be worth all this. Is that why you're burning the world down? For a whore you could buy in—"

He doesn't finish the sentence. Somehow, the first blow lands on its own. The metal crowbar against his jaw. The bone lets out a crackling snap, twisting. Spewing those dirty words about Nyx without knowing a damn thing. Trying to provoke me with that. He succeeded.

I don't follow with lucidity. There are bone cracks, skin colliding with metal. The crowbar is stained red. My head doesn't register it—it's all automatic and boiling. My body burns. He was going to tell me to get another one in a brothel. That there are whores everywhere. That *he*'s not worth so much. That Nyx is replaceable.

This is the limit.

My vision darkens, and I can only see the color red with the body beneath my blows. It's the second time today. I'm losing my mind.

I don't know if ten seconds or ten minutes pass. My palm throbs with the friction, I breathe heavily with the force of each impact, and I feel a gooey sensation. It spreads across my face, my hands. It drips onto my clothes.

I don't know what brings me back. But, eventually, the fog dissipates. My body stops.

Sergei has turned into a red mess. His face is shapeless. The chair is broken. I'm drenched in blood.

Again.

I take a deep breath. Grigory is looking at the floor, avoiding the grotesque form slumped on the chair.

I let the crowbar drop.

Luca is the first to move. I hear him behind me, with slow, almost cautious steps. As if I were a wild animal. I feel him at my back, keeping a safe distance. He says nothing for a moment before extending a clean cloth.

I accept it. The tremor in my hands doesn't stop. I wipe the clean white cloth across my face, and it returns stained crimson. I wrap my hands, wiping the excess blood from them until I have a soaked cloth.

I turn around. Luca's face is tense, tight. I walk past him.

"Clean this shit up," I say.

There's no answer. My men walk more silently around me. They're afraid to irritate me. They *know* I'm losing my mind.

I leave the hall. Dmitry waits for me on the other side of the warehouse, immune to the noises due to the distance. When I enter, he's standing, his back to me, speaking softly on the phone with Svetlana. He glances over his shoulder when he hears my footsteps.

His eyes drop from mine to my hands, to the splashes on my face, to the dark stains on my shirt collar. His calm is unshaken. He covers his phone's

microphone and says, "Another suit for the laundry. I see your conversation with Sergei was productive."

"Waste of time," I complain.

Dmitry points with his chin to a small bathroom near the door. "Go wash your face."

Without a word, I go.

My own image in the mirror stares back at me: sunken eyes, stained shirt, dried blood on my skin. I haven't slept in too long. It's really starting to affect me.

I turn on the faucet and splash cold water on my face. The water running down the sink is pink. I wash my hands, and the crimson dissolves, disappearing down the drain. The feeling doesn't go away.

"Donya."

I see Dmitry appearing at the door through the mirror. He's no longer on the phone with our sister.

"We have an alert from Atlantic City. It's a strange anomaly. The IT team can't explain it."

He extends a tablet screen to me as I dry my hands. An idiocy. It's even offensive to think that, in the midst of all this, Svetlana finds it a priority to inform us about a goddamn technical error. I glance at the screen.

ALERT: Anomalous payment activity. Three (3) low-value ($1,000) jackpots triggered in a 90-second sequence in sector 4.

I almost laugh in contempt. *That's* it? For *three thousand dollars?* I bite my tongue not to send him to hell. I keep reading out of reflex.

Affected machines:

ID 778 - Siberian Storm

ID 781 - Ace's Ant

ID 783 - Lucky Loot

My first reaction is contempt. Stupid names. What's the relevance of this to a security alert? Svetlana is losing focus, drowning in useless data while I'm getting my hands dirty for them.

I almost push the tablet back to Dmitry, but something holds me. An annoying detail.

The repetition.

Siberian Storm. Ace's Ant. Lucky Loot. All with a single initial.

What the hell is this?

The word Dmitry used: anomaly. Strange.

It's... almost theatrical. And there's only one person I know who turns chaos into theater. Who communicates through riddles and contempt.

Nyx.

I stare at the letters again. He knows I'm not a technician. The message is something even an animal like me can see. The pattern.

S.S. A.A. L.L.

The obvious.

Siberian Storm. Ace's Ant. Lucky Loot.

S. A. L.

Blind rage finds a target. A name.

Sal.

That son of a bitch Nyx, alive, points his finger directly from the grave they dug for him.

"It's him," I say without thinking.

Dmitry frowns. "Who?"

"Sal," I say, pushing the tablet back to him. "It's Sal. All along."

Dmitry takes the tablet, scanning the machine names, and I see the moment he understands. "The initials..."

"All resources," I say. "Redirect everything to dig him up. Send the IT team to comb through everything again—emails, calls, cards, and logins. Check his car records, the history of all his credit cards, and security camera footage from every place he stepped in the last week."

Dmitry doesn't hesitate. He nods, already with his phone to his ear, while making parallel communications on the tablet.

I walk past him. Back to the entrance.

A name. A target.

I open the door.

"Call me when you have an address. I'll go get him myself."

THE SMELL OF GUNPOWDER AND CLEAN GUN OIL CLEARS MY HEAD. I LOAD my Vektor. The metal is familiar, fitting in my hand like an ancient weight.

My target has a face. A face I see with every shot that echoes through the concrete firing range.

Where is he?

My cell phone vibrates on the bench beside me. Dmitry's name glows on the screen. *Finally*.

I answer on the first ring. "Speak."

"*We found him. Sal,*" Dmitry says hurriedly. "*He made a mistake. Used a burner phone to call his wife's number and kept the call too long. Our team triangulated it. A roadside motel in Jersey. Route 46.*"

He sends me the exact address. I hang up without another word.

Twenty minutes later, the Escalade slides off the main road. The roadside motel is about an hour outside the city, with a dimly lit, dilapidated parking lot. The neon sign flickers, dying and coming back to life.

Luca, who has been silent beside me the whole time, already knows what to do. He gets out of the car before me. I watch him walk to the small reception window, where a bored night clerk watches TV. The conversation is short. I don't see money changing hands. Just the sheer bulk of Luca's body and the look on his face. The clerk hands over a master key without asking questions.

"Room 2B" is all Luca says once he's back.

Room 2B is at the end of an open-air corridor that smells of mold and cheap disinfectant. We don't knock. Knocking gives time to think. To react.

Luca inserts the master key.

I push the door open and step inside.

The room is a coffin. Unmade bed, a half-eaten pizza in a box on the floor, the dusty smell of tobacco. And there he is. Sal. Thin, pale, with wrinkled clothes and messy hair.

He turns. He sees me standing in the doorway, with Luca behind me, and freezes. The blood drains from his already pale face. The cell phone he was holding shatters on the linoleum floor.

He opens his mouth, perhaps to scream, perhaps to beg. No sound comes out. He knows why I'm here. He knows what I've done to men for far less.

I step into the room. Luca closes the door behind me. The click of the lock is Sal's death sentence.

He scrambles backward, tripping over an empty pizza box. Panic disfigures his face. He starts to explain before I say anything.

"Mr. Volkov, please! They forced me!" he exclaims. "They were going to kill me, they showed me pictures of what they do... I had no choice!"

Pictures. His excuse is so weak it's an insult. I might have thought a little before disfiguring this bastard's face if the Malakovs had his family, but they didn't even need to. His cowardice was enough. He sold himself out to save his pathetic hide.

"Are you afraid of *pictures*, Sal?" I say. I take a slow step toward him. He cringes.

I lean down, bringing myself level with him, and he tries to pull away. Cornered. I see sweat running down his face, his crooked glasses sliding down his nose, his pupils dilated with fear.

"Today, Sal, I saw a man, alive and conscious, with both legs broken and every one of his fingers torn off. His jaw broke on the second kick. It hung loose. And even then, he tried to speak. I couldn't understand a damn thing. We cut his knee tendon like it was rubber. He still tried to stand. Thought he was going to escape. Do you know how many pieces we sent him to the Malakovs in, Sal?"

Sal lets out a low moan. He doesn't have the courage to look at me. The smell of his sweat is acidic, soaking the cheap T-shirt clinging to his body. His chest rises and falls too fast. He can't answer.

"Seven," I say. "He was still blinking when we decapitated him. The head was last. And you're telling me you snitched because of a fucking *picture*?"

He sobs.

"Almost *twenty years* under our protection, Sal. And all the Malakovs needed was to show you a picture for you to forget all that."

He stutters, makes a choked sound of crying and panic. I'm barely able to understand what he's saying. "D-Dante, please... I've always been loyal..."

And he calls me *Dante*. The intimacy he thinks he has the right to use makes me nauseous.

I grip his jaw tightly. He lets out a terrified grunt, trying to merge with the wall, and his skin reddens. I feel his bones at my fingertips.

"You don't call me Dante, you pathetic little shit," I say through clenched teeth, forcing him to look at me. "You traded a boy who would do

your job with his eyes closed and one hand behind his back to protect yourself. He's worth ten of you. Look at the fucking time you're making me waste, Sal. You have no way to repay that, huh?"

He tries to move his head. I hold it so it hurts. He cries like a bastard.

Sal has been under our protection for so long that Svetlana placed him as one of the last items on a list of suspects—people with internal access to our systems. He knew my father, for fuck's sake, had a degree from the best university in the United States paid for by *my* family. A poor skinny kid from Brighton Beach making a living because of *us*.

We always knew Sal was a coward. He doesn't participate in violence, he cowers in heavy meetings, and he's never carried a weapon. But this was seen as a quality for his job. No one needed him to be a killer, just to be loyal.

I let go of him with a shove, but I don't step away.

"You're going to tell me where they took him," I say. I pull one of his wrists close—thin, pale, and weak. He trembles, tempted to pull his hand away. I squeeze it. "The address. The security details. Everything." I slide my hand to his pinky finger. I hold it between the joints. The bones are thin. "Or I'll break this finger. And then the next. And the next. Until you can no longer type a single line of code for the rest of your useless life."

His hand shakes. I hold it firmly, pressing his pinky upward, listening to him breathe fast and heavy.

I lean in. "Where is he?"

"A warehouse!" he screams immediately. His voice breaks with intensity, and he continues, choked, "Newark! Near the shipyard! I'll give you the address! I know the security flaws, I know how it works!"

He spits out the address, the coordinates, the details about camera positions, all in a desperate torrent of information. I let him speak.

When he finally falls silent, gasping, looking at me with miserable hope, I squeeze his finger a little more.

"Good boy, Sal."

I press. The sound of the bone breaking is dry.

He only screams when I move away. I straighten up, smooth the lapels of my suit—this time, not covered in blood.

"That was for wasting my time."

I leave Sal writhing on the floor, holding a crooked finger against his chest, pressing it as if it would help somehow. I turn to Luca. I nod at him,

and he walks to the sobbing wretch on the floor.

"Please... Dante... please..." Sal groans.

I open the door. Luca pulls him up by his shirt and carries him like a sack of potatoes behind me.

"Let's go for a walk, Sal," I say before lighting a cigarette.

I LEAN INTO THE FRONT SEAT. THE LEATHER CREAKS. SAL FLINCHES, EVEN though I haven't touched him. I ignore his pathetic fear and press the cold barrel of my Vektor against the base of his skull. He lets out a low whimper.

"I'm going to tell you what happens now, Sal," I whisper. "In one minute, you're getting out of this car. You will walk, not run, to that security booth you see. You will go inside and use your master code to put the system into maintenance mode. That will shut down the perimeter sensors and put the external cameras on a five-minute loop. Five minutes, Sal." I press the barrel harder. "My snipers are already in position. They are aiming at you right now. If you hesitate, if you mistype the code, if you even think about triggering the silent alarm… the first bullet won't go through your head. It will go through your knee. The second, through the other one. We will leave you crippled in the middle of that yard for your Malakov friends to find. Am I clear?"

He tries to nod, a jerky, spastic movement. "Y-yes, Mr. Volkov."

"Good." I lean back. "Luca."

Luca unlocks the doors. He opens the passenger side and pulls Sal out of the car without any ceremony, tossing him into the light rain.

"Go," Luca growls.

Sal stumbles and begins his lonely walk toward the security booth, pulling a sleeve down to cover a crooked, swollen finger.

Sal's panic in the interrogation room was productive. He gave us everything, thinking it would buy him a forged pardon. The warehouse is a nearly legitimate front facility in the territory of the Malakovs' second-in-command, Alexei Malakov. Discreet on purpose. Few guards on the perimeter so as not to draw attention, but with a robust internal formation. Dmitry confirmed it with satellite imagery. All we needed was the human key to unlock the door. And there he goes.

I pick up a tablet that mirrors the feed from one of my snipers. The green crosshairs rest on the back of Sal's head.

I have two snipers on opposing rooftops, with clear sightlines to all entrances and exits. With me and Luca is the assault team, ready for infiltration. A third containment team is waiting for the signal two blocks away, ready to block the streets and cover our exit if shit hits the fan.

In my ear, Dmitry's voice, our eye in the sky back at the base, is calm. "*East rooftop sentry identified and eliminated. But there's atypical movement in the back lot. An unmarked transport van just arrived.*"

A van. In the middle of the night. In the middle of a war.

Alexei wouldn't risk a valuable shipment now. A changing of the guard would use passenger cars.

I watch Sal through the window. The pathetic figure walking too slowly, eating up precious seconds.

"I want eyes on that van," I say into the comm. "If the back door opens, snipers have a green light to shoot the tires. Immobilize the vehicle."

"*Understood*."

Sal finally reaches the booth. His hands are shaking so badly he can barely hit the keypad. The sniper's green crosshairs remain fixed on his neck. A single command from me and his mediocre existence would be over.

"*He's in*," Dmitry says.

The wait is torture. Ten seconds. Twenty.

"*System status is maintenance*," Dmitry's voice finally announces. "*Service door is open. You are clear for entry.*"

I don't wait another second.

"Luca. Let's go," I order, already pushing the Escalade's door open.

We step out into the rain. The distance between our blind spot and the back service door is a hundred meters of gravel and open yard.

Sal exits the booth with the stupid relief of having survived his pathetic walk. The relief is short-lived. Luca reaches him first. One hand clamps over his mouth, while the other spins him around and shoves him against the wall of the booth.

"You make a sound, I'll open your throat right here," Luca whispers to him.

My focus is on the door. Sal is just baggage now. We drag him with us like a reluctant guide, the barrel of a gun pressed against his back.

We reach the door. One of my men, Marco, picks the lock with a tension tool. The click is almost inaudible. The door opens with a low creak.

We push Sal inside first. If there's a trap, he'll trigger it. There isn't.

The warehouse interior is cavernous. It smells of metal, dampness, and diesel oil. It's quiet, with a distant hum from a generator and dripping from a puddle somewhere. We move in formation, using the stacks of crates and old machinery as cover. We can't alert them or we risk them executing Nyx before we get to him.

Sal is trembling so hard his teeth are chattering. Luca holds him tightly enough that he's forced to stay quiet.

We reach a fork in the corridor. Two identical metal doors. I press the blade of my knife against Sal's throat. He freezes.

"Which one?" I whisper.

He raises a trembling hand and points to the left door.

"Are you sure, Sal? If you're wrong, I'll cut out your tongue and leave you to bleed out here."

"I'm sure. It leads to the secondary storage wing," he stammers.

Two guards at the end of that hall, near the next junction. Stationary. Talking.

I make a hand signal to the team. Two targets. Me and Luca.

We move. Their discipline is a joke. Their backs are to the corridor, one of them laughing at something. Complacent.

I make no sound. I approach my target from behind. I clamp my hand over his mouth, muffling any sound of surprise as I sink a combat knife into his kidney, once, and then into the side of his neck. I let his body convulse for a second before it goes limp. I lay him on the ground without a sound. The blood stains my fingers.

Beside me, Luca does the same to the other. Two dull thuds on the floor. It's over.

Sal, who was forced to watch, gags into his hand. Luca pulls him along by the collar, not caring about his obvious struggle not to vomit.

We keep moving forward. Sal points us to the final room: a reinforced metal door in the middle of a hallway. Four guards.

Two are posted like statues, flanking the reinforced metal door in the middle of the hall. Impossible to get behind them. Further ahead, at the end of the dead-end corridor, a third guard watches the entire hall. The fourth,

and most dangerous, is a patrolman who paces back and forth too close to our position, impatient, breaking discipline.

My blood boils. They are protecting the man who's in there so *they* can hurt him.

Their formation is defensive. Suicidal for a frontal assault. Attacking one alerts the others.

I turn to Sal. I grab the front of his shirt and pull him close, far enough from the corridor that the guards won't hear the communication.

"You're going to walk to that intersection," I order Sal. "Does the patrolling guard know you?"

"Y-yes, that's Misha..." he stammers.

"Good," I cut him off. "You're going to call Misha over. Discreetly. You'll go with him down the north corridor. You'll say you have something urgent to show him, away from the main door." I squeeze tighter. "If he doesn't follow you, you die here. If you scream, you die. If they suspect something and shoot you, we'll use you as a shield. Do you understand your options?"

He nods frantically with tears in his eyes.

I let him go. "Go."

Sal stumbles forward, straightening his rumpled clothes, trying to look minimally normal. He hides his broken finger in his sleeve and walks. He reaches the intersection, stops, and looks at the patrolman.

"Misha," he calls out. "I need to talk to you."

The patrolman stops. He sees Sal and frowns. Sal gestures with his head toward the north corridor.

"It's important. About the Volkovs."

It works. The curiosity and urgency of the name *Volkov* is the perfect bait, paired with the obvious, latent fear on Sal's face. It looks like he's about to report an invasion. Misha starts walking towards Sal. The guard on the right of the door hesitates for a second, looks at his partner, and then decides to follow Misha to see what's happening.

Perfect. Their formation is broken. Sal turns north, with two guards now having their backs to us, who have taken cover behind stacked crates. The other two remain at their posts, but their attention is divided, looking to where their partners have gone.

It's the window of opportunity.

I give the signal.

Yury and Abram have a clean line of sight to the backs of the two guards who followed Sal. Two silenced pistols fire as one. The two men fall forward, dead before they hit the ground.

At the exact instant of the shots, Luca and I run the meters that separate us from the main door. I reach the guard on the left before he can properly aim his weapon. I push the muzzle upwards and slice his throat. He doesn't have time to process. Beside me, Luca reaches his target and neutralizes him with the same efficiency.

The corridor is clear. Four bodies on the ground. And our rat, terrified, is being dragged back to us by Abram, his face pale and covered in a cold sweat.

Finally. No more games. No more tactics.

I walk down the corridor. I stop in front of the reinforced metal door. I signal to Yury and Abram to hold their position at the end of the hall, while Luca and I deal with the door locks.

A murmur leaks from inside. Muffled voices talking, one of them coarse and angry. Impossible to know how many are in there if someone is silent. Going in blind is suicide. Nyx could be used as a shield.

I signal to Luca. He understands immediately. From his tactical leg bag, he pulls out a thin, flexible cable with a micro-lens at the tip, connected to a small handheld monitor. A fiber-optic camera.

Luca carefully slides the tip of the camera through the minimal gap under the door. He hands me the monitor.

The image appears, grainy in a night-vision green hue. And my stomach clenches.

Nyx is there. Tied to a metal chair in the center of the room. His face is swollen, with dried blood at the corner of his mouth. But he's sitting up straight, his chin lifted in a silent challenge I know all too well.

There are two guards in the room with him. One is sitting on a crate, cleaning a pistol, bored. The other is a restless brute. He looks furious. He's letting himself be provoked by Nyx—it's obvious from Nyx's victorious, crooked smile.

The brute stops in front of Nyx, leaning in until their faces are inches apart. Luca positions himself to, in the worst-case scenario, blow this fucking door off its hinges.

I press my ear against the metal.

"*...that arrogant little whore face of yours... before Ivan breaks you in half, you're fucked with me. Every hole serves the same purpose*."

Hole. The word reverberates in my head.

Then, I hear the other guard's voice. Laughing.

"*...everyone's gonna get a chance with that one. We'll form a line*."

I step back from the door. When Luca sees my face, his professional expression turns to alarm.

"Sir?" he whispers.

I give the signal. *Me first.*

He nods, his jaw tight.

Luca kneels and pulls a short-barreled shotgun from its holster, a breaching tool. He gets in position, rests the muzzle of the gun over the metal lock. I nod. He fires.

Two dry cracks—metal breaking. The lock and hinges fly into the room, shattered.

Before the dust settles, I kick what's left of the door. It swings open with a bang.

The two guards, stunned by the sudden, violent noise, barely have time to raise their weapons. The one sitting on the crate is hit by two bullets to the chest—he falls backward, dead before he can raise his gun.

But I don't care about him. My target is the other one.

The brute, stepping away from Nyx, faces me. Everything else is wiped from my vision. A blur.

I don't register much. His gun flies from his hand, and a breaking noise cracks against the wall. Some bone, from the impact. It was me who pushed him. I punch him. It's not a lucid choice. His voice echoes in the corners of my mind. *Arrogant little whore*. I don't know what they did to Nyx while I wasn't here. I haven't examined him. I haven't seen the state of his clothes, his injuries. He was smiling. But that means nothing with him. He's not afraid of a fucking thing. I punch. Once, twice, three times. The bone in his nose gives way under my knuckles. His sclera turn red with blood. Did he touch Nyx? With that *filthy mouth*? Reducing him to a *hole*. I grab his throat. I force his head against the wall. I hear a high-pitched ringing. Is it him? Screaming? He *should* be. I squeeze. I want him to suffer. I want him to regret every second of his miserable existence.

My knife. I don't know when I unsheathed it. I grab it. This blade is powder-forged with a convex edge. Always a clean entry. It sinks in. I pull

my arm up. Squeeze. The blade rises.

His red-sclera eyes stare at me. Filthy eyes. *Every hole serves the same purpose*. He said that. The blade comes out. I use it again. I'm still squeezing his neck. Something pops. I stab him. Again, again, again. His eyes distort. I didn't follow. I didn't see everything they did to him. But they were going to hurt him. *More*.

I can't tell when the knife stops cutting. Everything is covered in red. The ringing that blocked out all the sounds around me slowly fades. I hear noises.

I let his body go. It slides down the wall to the floor. I can see his intestines. But I can't see a face.

There are more sounds. I blink and my vision clears. I see a room. A chair.

And him.

Yes. He's alive. His hands and feet are tied, but he's *alive*.

I approach. *Nyx*.

He saw this. He saw this fucking loss of control.

Fuck it. The thought is automatic. *It means nothing*. I'm still holding the knife, the blade covered in blood. My hands are soaked, viscous. The ebony handle has turned red. *Fuck it.*

I ignore the heat rising up my neck. I approach him, kneel before his chair. I reach my hands behind him. The same bloody blade frees the cords on his wrists. I untie his feet. I hesitate before looking at him. This ugly, animalistic carnage doesn't align with the control I project for him. I shouldn't have let him see this, the opened remains of a thug for talking shit.

His face. I avoid his eyes. I see bruises. The bridge of his nose, crooked. His lips are cut, his temple swollen. One of his sclera has a red blotch. He was beaten. The bastards put their hands on him.

I touch his face. I try to wipe away the dried blood from the corner of his lips, but my thumb only leaves a smear of fresh blood.

"They hurt you," I say. My voice comes out harsher than I wanted, and I'm holding his face too tightly. An automatic impulse.

I feel his hands on my chest. Light. One of them slides up, up to my neck, his thumb brushing my jaw.

Fuck it. I meet his eyes.

There's no disgust there. No disinterest, no disappointment. There's *reverence*. Something feverish that looks far too much like idolatry. He

looks at me like a lover.

He pushes himself forward. *Devoted*, he grabs my shirt and kisses me like he can't wait, like there's no one else in the room.

For an instant, I allow there to be no one else.

I hold his waist. I bring him close to me, fitting myself between his legs. His body is a perfect fit against mine. I let the knife fall to hold him properly. I'm still shaking, still holding him too tightly, and he melts, tangling his fingers in my hair, rolling his tongue against mine. He touches all this blood. He gets dirty with me.

"They don't punch hard enough, mister," he whispers against my mouth.

It's almost a relief to hear that voice. I have the urge to laugh. I hadn't dared to think about never hearing it again, hadn't dared to think what that would be like.

"Fucking lunatic," I say. He kisses me again.

The noises grow louder. Voices in the corridor. The haze that had erased everything but Nyx falls apart, dissolving into the metallic smell of blood, gunpowder, and melted paint. Warehouse. We're still with the Malakovs.

Luca's voice cuts through whatever obfuscation is still alive.

"Sir," he calls. His voice falters with a stutter I've never heard.

I glance at him over my shoulder. Nyx is wrapped around my neck, nuzzling against me, kissing the blood on my jaw.

Only Luca sees this. Good.

"We have to go. Now," he says, urgent, with a forgotten confusion in his eyes.

He's right. The breach wasn't silent.

I push Nyx away. I need to distance myself from what he does to me to be efficient. I don't know how long we spent here—*too long*. The silence we entered into is violated by a chaotic confusion of voices and doors.

We need to get out before they corner us in this dead-end hall.

"Get up," I order Nyx. I retrieve my knife, forgotten on the floor, and sheathe it. "Can you walk?"

He nods. He pushes himself up against the arm of the chair. He's weak. But he's walking. It's enough.

"With me," I say, and he obeys with a clouded gaze. Even more than I remember, he doesn't hide it now. He looks at me as one would look at a god.

The silence is already broken. I pull a pistol from its holster.

I tap my earpiece. "Dmitry. The route through the back is compromised. Give me the alternative."

My brother's voice answers instantly, calm. "*North sector. Loading Dock 3. It leads to a maneuvering yard. The containment team is already moving there. It's your only way out.*"

I turn to my men, who are already positioning themselves at the broken door.

"Yury, Abram," I call out. "Sal is your shield." I ignore Sal's low cry. Abram presses his arm firmly to keep him still. I look at Luca. "The boy. You've got him." I grab Nyx's arm, who is still staring at me with those feverish eyes, and push him towards Luca. "Don't let anything get near him. And keep him on his feet."

Luca nods, immediately placing himself between Nyx and the door.

"I'll clear the way," I say. "Hold formation. Move!"

We don't take three steps out of the room before the first Malakov guards appear at the end of the hall, shouting orders.

There's no time for careful aim. It's suppressive fire. The sound of my shots and my men's echoes off the concrete, deafening. Splinters of the wall fly past my face. I duck behind a metal pillar, reloading.

"Cover!" I yell, as Luca pulls Nyx behind a container.

I see more men arriving from the east junction. We're outnumbered, cornered at the back of their territory. Exactly where I didn't want to be.

But now, with Nyx behind me, the fury is fuel.

"Luca, on my signal, suppressive fire on the east junction," I say over the gunfire, through the comm. "I'm advancing on the left."

He responds with a burst of shots. It's my signal.

I break from cover, running low. Every meter towards the north dock is bought with bullets and blood.

One of Malakov's men, who was rising to shoot, falls with two holes in his chest from my bullets. But there are too many of them. They keep coming, using the mess of machinery and containers like a maze.

I dive behind a rusty forklift. Enemy bullets chip away at the metal near my head. Luca crawls to the cover beside me, pulling Nyx with him. Across the hall, I see Yury and Abram exchanging fire, using a terrified Sal as a quivering human shield.

We're pinned down. Cornered. For every man we take down, two more seem to emerge from the shadows.

"Dmitry," I call into the comm. "I need suppression on the central sector. Use the snipers."

Dmitry's response is immediate. "*Understood*."

A dry crack comes from outside, from above. It tears through the air. One of the skylight glass panels in the warehouse ceiling explodes in a shower of shards. The Malakov guard who was on the catwalk, pinning us down with heavy fire, disappears in a red mist, falling like a doll to the floor below.

The Malakov men stop shooting for a second, confused, looking up at the ceiling, trying to understand where that shot came from.

Three more cracks from outside. Cries of pain. The west cargo door goes silent.

It's the window we needed. A moment of hesitation from the enemy.

"Now!" I roar to my team. "Move!"

I break from cover first, shooting at anything that moves. Luca follows me with a firm hand on Nyx's back, pushing him forward while firing with the other. Yury and Abram provide cover, dragging Sal with them.

We run through the open area. Bullets buzz from all sides, but the enemy fire is sporadic, disorganized. They're afraid of the ghost on the roof.

We reach a new line of cover, behind a stack of wooden pallets. The corrugated door of Loading Dock 3 is just twenty meters away. So close.

Alexei Malakov's remaining men start to regroup. They're furious.

"Suppressive fire!" I exclaim, firing short bursts in their direction, forcing them to duck, but it's a stalemate. For every second we shoot, they answer with twice the fire. We're wasting ammo we don't have.

"Sir, we don't have a clean route!" Luca says beside me, tense. He keeps a protective arm in front of Nyx.

I look at the distance. Twenty meters. We could try a desperate run, but it would be suicide. We'd lose at least one man. Maybe more. Maybe the boy. I can't risk that. I need a plan, but there's no clear path that isn't pinned down, raining bullets.

I see something move. Peripheral vision. A low, fast blur.

Nyx.

He slides away from Luca's protection, crawling low and fast towards a dusty logistics terminal propped against the wall. The computer screen is dark.

"Nyx!" Luca hisses at him. "Get the fuck back here!"

He doesn't obey. His bruised hands fly over the keyboard as he peeks over his shoulder once. Luca covers his back, and the screen flickers, coming to life. Lines of code appear and disappear faster than I can read.

I move to cover him. I can't lose him here.

"Nyx!" I yell, hoping that if he won't obey Luca, he'll obey *me*, but my voice is muffled by the Malakovs' gunfire.

Suddenly, a metallic grinding noise. It comes from above. An industrial crane, a monster of steel that had been dormant above our heads. It starts to move. A hook the size of a car descends. It moves sideways, dragging a multi-ton shipping container.

The shooting stops. The Malakovs look up, at the source of the noise, and the container sways.

It drops.

The container sweeps through the exact area where most of the guards were taking cover.

The sound is bony, syrupy, and it echoes. Wine-red blood spreads from under the dust. The remaining guards scatter, shooting at the ceiling. Their line of defense has been obliterated.

The path to the loading dock is clear.

I look from the chaos of the swinging container to the terminal. Nyx is looking at me. There's a small, triumphant smile on his bloodied lips.

Of course.

It's Nyx.

I had forgotten, for a moment. Seeing him so vulnerable messed with what I already knew about him. I tried to keep him hidden to protect him, but he saw the tactical problem, found a solution I would have never conceived, and executed it in under thirty seconds.

I had forgotten. Nyx is the fucking deadliest weapon I have.

"Now!" I order my team. "To the dock!"

I run to Nyx myself, grab him by the arm, pulling him from the terminal.

We leave behind a trail of crushed bodies and a blood-stained container.

The alarm sound echoes throughout the warehouse, a piercing siren that mixes with the sporadic shots from the Malakovs.

Loading Dock 3 is ahead of us—a large, corrugated metal door. Luca doesn't wait for my order. He raises the breaching shotgun and fires twice at the lock, blowing the mechanism apart.

With a kick, I open the door. A black armored SUV skids in front of us, kicking up a cloud of dust. The containment team. Perfect timing.

"Get in!" I order, pushing Nyx towards the open vehicle door. Luca helps him up. Yury and Abram arrive right behind, throwing a terrified Sal onto the car floor like a sack of trash.

I'm the last one in. Luca slams the armored door shut.

Inside the SUV, there is silence. The blood still covers my hands, my face, my clothes. The car accelerates. It skids down the street at top speed.

Luca checks Nyx's injuries.

But Nyx's eyes are fixed on me.

Even in the dark, even bruised and covered in dust, there's a feverish glint in them. The same look of reverence as before, but now mixed with something else. Triumph.

The blood on his mouth, on his fingers, is the same that covers me.

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TWENTY-ONE

LEO

My head is hazy. It's hard for it not to be after all this. In an impersonal, generic, expensive hotel room, a man in glasses dabs antiseptic on the cuts on my face, and I can't focus on him. He pushes the crooked bone of my nose back into place, and the pain isn't pleasant—it just makes my eyes water and an imaginary nail file scrape against my bones—but I can't focus on that either. He injects a painkiller into my vein, says I wouldn't be able to swallow a pill with my face like this. Okay. I don't focus. The tramadol seeps in, clearing my head. I don't focus.

All I can think about is *him*.

I didn't know if I was going to survive. If the transfer had actually happened, Ivan would have surely killed me. I can't hold my tongue. I had decided I would die laughing at that idiot for completely losing his composure over some cheap provocation, and I would fade out thinking of *him*. Imagining that, at least, it would be *his* hands.

Honestly, dying at Dante's hands doesn't sound bad.

When he walked into that room, he didn't even look at me. He lunged at that nondescript henchman, and he must have heard the threats they threw at me. Luca executed the other one professionally, as he should, and Dante…

The look in his eyes was horrific. It sent a dirty shiver down my spine. He tore that man apart as if he had personally offended him. Blood splattered. A trickle shot across my cheek. He didn't even notice. He just

kept going until his hands were red up to the wrists, his lips pursed in hatred, his entire face smeared with blood. And I couldn't stop watching. The Dante who walked into that room was the most poetic death sentence I had ever seen. And I've never felt so safe.

I knew from the beginning that Dante wasn't like anyone else. No one had ever bothered to raise their voice for me, let alone their hands. And he crossed that room as if anyone who touched me was breaking a rule written in his own blood.

I'm not an idiot. I know it was instinct. Rage. Territory. But it was *for me*. And when he finally looked at me, with all that blood hiding his skin, I knew. I'll never be able to walk away from this.

Dante is the only light I recognize. What those guys did to me should have been a cheap, chemical aphrodisiac, finally feeling some remnant of dopamine, of adrenaline, but it wasn't. It wasn't him. It couldn't have been him.

I don't know when this stopped being chemical. It's been a while. I was flirting with death in that room—it was only when he walked in that something switched on. A spark. An instinct. My whole body responded to him.

It's the light from the hallway that pulls me back. Luca is standing in the doorway—he's just entered, and he's waiting for the doctor to release me. He looks at me. He instantly looks away when I meet his gaze.

He saw the kiss. He saw the carnage. Dante didn't push me away, not even when he was calling for him, hurrying him to leave. Dante allowed it. I held him before Luca's eyes, kissed his face, pulled him to me. It makes me feel things I can't even name.

Luca doesn't understand what happened. He doesn't know how to deal with me now.

The doctor finishes placing a final bandage on my eyebrow ridge. "There. Try not to get punched in the face again for the next 24 hours."

I give him the closest thing to a smile I can manage. "No promises."

Luca clears his throat. "The boss is waiting for you," he says. He's tense.

I get up from the bed. I try not to breathe through my nose, but breathing through my mouth also creates a sensation of sandpaper on my ribs. One is broken. I have a compression wrap around my torso, and it makes everything even more uncomfortable.

I walk slowly toward Luca. He says nothing. I follow him out of the room—the last one down the hall is where the most feared man in the city and his siblings are. The Volkov triumvirate.

Luca opens the door for me. It's a luxury suite, bigger than my house. Svetlana is present on a large video call monitor, and Dante is standing, watching the city from the window. He turns as I enter.

A man in a gray suit with perfectly slicked-back hair stands before a wall of screens, analyzing data. That must be Dmitry, the middle Volkov brother. The three of them stare at me.

"Mr. Hays," Dmitry says. He stands up, walking toward me while closing the top button of his suit. He extends his hand to me as if he were meeting his brother's boyfriend. "You've been the center of our operations for a while—Dante talks a lot about you."

"Dima," I hear Dante complain.

Dmitry extends his hand and smiles.

"Dmitry Volkov," he introduces himself.

I shake his hand.

"Allow me," he says, lightly taking my arm to help me walk.

It's a surprise. I didn't think a Volkov would show kindness.

"I'm fine," I say.

"I insist."

I walk slowly—with Dmitry—to the armchair in the center of the room, facing them. Luca remains at the door as I sit down, trying to keep my torso straight. It's a bit hard to breathe.

Dmitry returns to his chair behind an office desk piled with documents.

Dima. The nickname slipped out of Dante automatically, intimately; someone you've grown up with. He said it with a serene brutality, without even realizing it. Some very poorly calibrated part of my nervous system found that beautiful.

"Report," Dante orders.

I let the spell break.

"They wanted to decrypt the data Sal stole," I say, getting straight to the point. "I met Alexei Malakov in person. Interesting experience."

They all have the same reaction: a subtle frown, a sense of unease. The king showing his face on the board is never a good sign.

"*He spoke to you?*" says Svetlana. She turns, and I see the reflection of a screen in her glasses. She's doing her research, checking records.

"He did. Even tried to recruit me. But I don't think he was serious."

Dmitry is watching me more closely now. Dante has never taken his suffocating focus off me.

"*Elaborate*," Svetlana says, looking back at us.

I lean back in the chair. I feel a sharp pain in my ribs.

"I'll tell you what happened, what I *think* happened, and then you can be the judges," I say. Svetlana isn't used to an outsider speaking so casually to her. Her annoyance is visible. "I don't know how long I was confined, but the first few hours or days were in isolation. I'd say they were gauging the Volkovs' reaction to decide how to proceed. By the time Alexei arrived, Viktor Orlov was already dead, and someone had been separated into six pieces after…"

"Seven," Dmitry corrects.

"Seven," I continue. "Alexei wanted to know how much you were paying me. Made up something about a counter-offer…"

"*Why do you think he made it up?*" Svetlana interrupts, impatient.

"He wanted me to decrypt the stolen data willingly. And I did—"

"*You what?!*" Svetlana immediately exclaims. Dmitry touches his temples, Dante tenses into that hateful expression I know so well.

I push myself forward in the chair. "It was for a good reason!" I say, but I have to lean back to speak with a broken rib. "He gave me a controlled terminal to work on—to reach you, I needed to run a script on an open network, which they only allowed after checking the files for security and authenticity. And apparently, the message I left at the casino got through. Or we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Silence. Svetlana is displeased and opens her mouth to ask questions, but she lacks the expertise. I can almost feel it: *how did you get a script past their check?*

I'd even answer it.

"Let's assume that this data, after our attacks, is no longer useful to his operations," Dmitry says. I get it now—Dmitry is the peacemaker brother. He glances at Dante and Svetlana. "Right, Sveta? Donya?"

Donya. What an adorable nickname.

The two say nothing. It's not right by them, but Dmitry turns back to me anyway. "Continue, Nyx."

"Well, he checked the files before you all arrived, so if I hadn't done what I did, I'd be a corpse right now."

"*We get it*," Svetlana says. She's irritated. It's a little funny that her temper is so similar to Dante's. "*Get to the point*."

I give her the best half-smile I can muster. "After that, he told me Dante was trying to wipe the Malakov name off the map. That's why he was sending me to Ivan Malakov. He implied Ivan had a firmer hand—but I've worked for them before, and Ivan, so the rumors go, is just an unhinged killer. What *I* think really happened is that regardless of the Volkovs' reaction, Alexei would win. If there was no retaliation, he'd try to blackmail me into working for him; if there was, and *there was*, he'd throw me to Ivan as bait, wait for you to dismantle half the empire, and then take over by centralizing it all himself. In his best-case scenario, both Ivan and I would die, and the Volkovs would still be wounded."

Svetlana has no direct reply this time. She and Dmitry pause, thinking about the implications. There's a poorly disguised rivalry between Alexei and Ivan, but confirmation of a planned internal war is new. And it is, as far as we know, a *one-sided* war. Otherwise, Ivan wouldn't accept any gifts from Alexei like this.

It sinks in. I see the reflections of two screens in Svetlana's glasses, Dmitry checks his papers. And Dante tenses.

He doesn't take his eyes off me. I saw the veins in his wrists, his fists clenching. It was at the hypothetical possibility of Ivan killing me.

And fuck, he is so fucking beautiful.

"The analysis matches the movement of Alexei's funds to contingency accounts in the last twelve hours," Dmitry says. "He was preparing to fall back."

"A one-sided war," Dante says. He gets it. He understands where I'm going.

Dmitry considers this with an enthusiastic nod. "At least, *visibly* one-sided," he says, running his eyes over the documents on his desk. "We can use this."

Svetlana, through the screen, finally seems to agree. "*Alexei's plan is good. It only failed because he was too confident that Sal wouldn't rat him out to us at the first broken finger*." She stares at me through the screen. "*And because your analysis is correct*."

It's the closest thing to a compliment I'm going to get from her.

"Ivan is proud and stupid," Dmitry says. "All we need is an anonymous leak. We'll use Alexei's plan against him. The Malakovs will neutralize each

other in a war against their own."

Dante looks at Dmitry, then at the screen where Svetlana is watching us. She looks apprehensive. He stares at me.

"Sal's position is vacant," he says. He doesn't move from where he is, just watches me, arms crossed, his back against the wall next to the window.

Then he gives the order.

"It's yours."

This is the biggest aphrodisiac I've ever felt.

Dopamine. Adrenaline. Serotonin. A fucking symphony of chemicals flooding my brain.

A position. A title. Head of Cybersecurity. *Fuck the title*. What really matters is answering *to him*.

The blood heats in my veins. It thickens. The pain in my bones transforms. It becomes part of the sensation. I want to kneel. Here. Now. In front of all of them. For him. I want to feel him. His hand pulling my hair, his skin leaving marks on mine. His strength. Any real proof that I exist *for* him.

My breath grows short. I lean forward in the armchair—it's involuntary. I know I'm looking at him *that way*. This hunger doesn't belong in a business meeting, but I can't bring myself to care. Not after everything.

"Anything you command, mister," comes out as a whisper.

I'm not hiding it. The desire, the hunger, the submission—it's all written on my face. My whole body is angled toward him. A devotee awaiting communion. And the others in the room are forced to witness this profanity.

Dmitry shifts in his chair. He watches everything with an elegant professionalism, but he sees how I lean. How my entire body points to his brother. How I speak too softly, sweating desire and reverence in an environment that should only smell of power and threat.

He watches. He analyzes. And he decides he's seen enough.

"Sveta, we'll wrap up for now," he says, standing up. "I'll update you later."

Svetlana glares at him for a second, tense. But she understands. She knows.

"*Alright*," she says. The screen goes dark before she can say goodbye.

"Luca," Dmitry continues, grabbing a folder from the desk. "From now on, Mr. Hays has the same security authority as Sal did. His orders are

Dante's orders. Am I clear?"

Luca blinks. His eyes go from me to Dante, then retreat as if he's seen something he shouldn't have.

"Affirmative, sir."

"Excellent." Dmitry walks over to him with a forced calm. "I need to assign a team to keep an eye on Sal. Accompany me, if you would be so kind."

Luca nods silently. He leaves with Dmitry, almost in a hurry, and Dmitry gives me a small smile on his way out. He knows what he's doing.

He's leaving me alone with Dante.

Dante remains leaning against the wall, arms crossed, eyes on me. Then he moves. Two steps. Three. He stops in front of me. A fucking Roman god, looking down at me with an irritated fire.

His hand flies to my hair. A firm, cruel, controlled pull. He makes me lift my face without having to stand. My breath hitches. My body burns.

I'd come just from this, if he ordered me to.

"Never again," he growls, leaning into me. "In front of them."

The pressure of his fingers on my scalp is the only real thing in the world. It hurts. Wonderfully.

"It's hard," I say, "when you act like this."

He tightens his grip. I can't hold back a moan. I'm inviting him. *Do it. I want you to finish breaking me completely. Break the other ribs. Break my nose again. Touch me.*

But then, he lets go.

The gesture is abrupt.

He's suddenly back in his role. He walks to the window. Looks at the city. So impersonal. Would it still be like this if he weren't facing away from me?

"Listen closely, because I won't repeat myself," he says. The same tone he uses with his henchmen. "The position is yours. That means the entire digital security of the Volkovs is in your hands. The *responsibility* is yours. And if you fail… if there's another breach, if you put this family at risk…"

He pauses. It's strange. He takes a deep breath, as if he doesn't make these threats every day, as if he doesn't *want* to make this one. He turns to me. A face of stone, determined, filled with hatred. With cracked edges.

"It won't be Luca. It won't be any capo, any of my brothers. It will be *me*."

Death.

Being killed by Dante should sound threatening. Alexei, throwing me to Ivan, was, above all, afraid of this man's fury. But for me…

I was about to answer. But he continued.

"...I don't want to have to kill you, Nyx. Understood?"

Fuck.

I push myself up on the arms of the chair. The effort sends a sharp bolt through my ribs. Moving my face does, too. Fuck it. I force myself up, make my legs hold me. Some of my muscles tremble. I clench them into a shaky fist and approach. He watches me, frowning. He doesn't understand what I'm doing. I don't stop. I stand before him, and I *have* to touch him. It's an unbearable impulse.

I lean in. He doesn't push me away, and I don't give him time to think. I kiss his mouth.

Stretching up to reach him hurts. It leaves me breathless. *Dante* leaves me breathless. I touch his chest. It's firm, anchoring me to the ground.

He tenses. A hand pushes my shoulder, lightly, almost *carefully*. He only moves me back enough to look at my face.

"Nyx," he calls out, rough, but gentle. "You're hurt."

My face has seen better days. I get it. But this concern hiding inside him is impossible. I *have* to touch him.

"I wouldn't mind dying," I whisper back, breathless, "if it were by your hands."

I see something break in his eyes. The wall.

I lean in. My whole body protests. I brush my mouth against his, and the words come out without me thinking. Like a reason. It's automatic.

"I love you."

I kiss him again, before he can rebuild the wall.

For a second, his hand presses against me. He's so much stronger than me and could break me in half if he wanted, but the pressure is so weak it doesn't move me. I remain. And he, slowly, holds my waist.

I wrap my arms around his neck. The burning, at this point, feels good. He presses me against him, and he's still rough, but now he holds me gently. He kisses me back. All of his kisses leave a cluster of heat in my groin, spreading through all my nerve endings as they explode with oxytocin and dopamine. The taste isn't of blood anymore—tobacco, whiskey, and a minty

undertone. I lean closer and feel the loose bone of my nose against his cheek. Fuck it. I feel his hair between my fingers. His tongue. Him.

"Don't say that again," Dante orders against my mouth. It's a frightening growl. It makes me shiver.

I smile into the kiss.

"I love you," I say again.

"Nyx…"

"I love you."

I kiss the corner of his mouth. His jaw.

He grips my waist tighter, and the movement makes me hold my breath, a sharp pang coming from my broken rib. It's an involuntary spasm, but he feels it.

Immediately, he stops. He pushes me away with a strange urgency. His hands assess me, feeling my body, and he stares at me with a closed-off expression. Another frightening order.

"Enough," he says, harshly. "You're hurt."

Hurt. It only registers now. He's *actually* stopping because of that.

I laugh. Laughing hurts too.

"After everything we've done... a broken rib is where you draw the line?" I say. I move closer. "You broke my molar once, remember, mister? I spent a week with a swollen face. But a wound someone else made..." I lower my hand. I touch his knuckles, still red, swollen from punching that guy. "...this one bothers you?"

He takes my hand.

He's about to answer when a knock sounds at the door.

It's Dmitry's voice, muffled by the wood.

"*Dante?... It's me. I'm coming in, okay? Very slowly. Just... announcing my entry so no one gets spooked.*"

Dante sighs. He pushes me away, but keeps a hand on my back, supporting me. I unwind myself from him. Standing straight again makes the pain lessen.

The door opens with comical slowness. Dmitry pokes his head in, his eyes fixed on the floor.

"I hope I'm not interrupting any... important strategic deliberations," he says, choosing his words with the care of someone walking through a minefield. "I know I asked Luca not to bother you, but it's about our... about Sal."

The mention of Sal's name breaks the spell. Dante removes my hand from his arm, and he recomposes himself the instant Dmitry's eyes hesitantly turn to us. He was expecting nudity.

"He's in the basement interrogation room," Dmitry continues. "He's cooperating. But we need to decide what to do with him. Long-term."

Dante looks at me one last time.

"Let's go," he says, his voice once again glacial and in command.

He walks past me and Dmitry, leaving the room, the general back at his post. Dmitry and I exchange a quick glance. He gives me a minimal smile, almost an apology.

He knows exactly what he interrupted.

SAL IS TIED TO A CHAIR IN THE CENTER OF THE ROOM, HIS HANDS BOUND TO the armrests. He seems smaller, more fragile. Terror has shrunken him. And, sitting in a chair directly in front of him, is Dante, with his arms crossed and legs spread. They had already talked before Luca brought me. Sal's face is swollen from crying, and I can imagine why. Dante knows how to be threatening.

Luca came for me a few hours after Dante followed Dmitry. Dante wanted me here. To witness this, to give me an example of what will happen to me if I betray him, or maybe just to *show me*.

Sal is miserable, pathetic. He's no evil genius. At most, a selfish coward.

Luca locks the door. I keep to the walls. Dante doesn't turn to me, and Sal doesn't lift his face. This place smells like a hospital. Disinfectant and cleaning products. It's unsettling.

"Do you know how much a man who's been with us for twenty years is worth, Nyx?"

He doesn't look at me when he asks. He looks at Sal.

I lean against the wall. The residual pains—partially devoured by the tramadol—are overshadowed by a morbid fascination. I like seeing Dante in his element. Giving orders, asserting himself, destroying.

"Twenty years," Dante continues, his voice low. I understand why Sal is trembling. That voice makes me tremble too. "It's a long time. Enough to know who we are. How we operate. What we do with rats." Then his voice

changes. It's for Sal now. A real threat. "What did you think was going to happen, Sal?"

Sal shakes his head. He's crying, but he seems convinced he won't get out of here alive. I see the pistol in Dante's holster, the black polymer reflecting in the harsh lights of the basement.

"I-I helped, Mr. Volkov," Sal tries to argue. He stammers as always but finds the courage to look Dante in the eye. "I told you where he was. I gave you a way in… I helped bring Nyx back. I-I fixed my mistake, Mr. Volkov, please…!"

"You didn't fix shit," Dante says. He doesn't raise his voice. That makes him even more threatening. "You cost me time. You cost me men. You handed our greatest asset over to our enemies, and you think you deserve credit because you did what you were told at sniper-point? I'm the fucking name that's kept you alive until now. You'd do well to remember that."

He pulls the pistol from its holster. The movement is slow, calm. Sal immediately panics, shaking his head. He weeps.

"No, no, Mr. Volkov, please…"

He struggles with his arms. They're tied firmly against the chair's rests. Dante pulls ammunition from an inner suit pocket—a gray magazine.

"I don't like knowing I'm about to make your wife a widow, Sal."

He slots the magazine into the pistol. A click. Sal begs. "Mr. Volkov, please, don't do this, I have children…"

"You should be grateful, Sal. I could do this in a much worse way. I'm going to kill you quickly."

Dante pulls back the slide. Sal's eyes go wide. The logic of his plea crumbles.

"Please… please, God, no, Dante, please, don't…" he says, to a God who hasn't set foot in this basement in a long time. He looks at me. Panicked. "Mr. Hays… Nyx… please! Tell him! I can be useful! I swear! I'll do anything! Please!"

Dante ignores the appeal. He stands up with the same calm with which he reloaded the pistol. He sighs with the monotony of someone who has executed countless men for far less.

He walks over to Sal, who is now sobbing uncontrollably. He stops in front of the chair.

Without rushing, he raises the pistol. The barrel aligns perfectly with the center of Sal's sweaty forehead. He pushes the safety down. Click.

I watch the scene unfold. Dante, perfect in his finality. The calm, the posture, the way the gun is a natural extension of his will. A god of death in an expensive suit.

But I don't want this to end yet. Not like this. There's a use for the rat.

I take a step forward, out of my corner of shadows.

"Dante."

Luca stiffens at the door. Sal stares at me with a renewed, miserable hope. Dante doesn't turn, but he doesn't shoot either. The gun remains steady, aimed at Sal's head.

I keep walking, slowly, until I stop beside him. So close I can smell his cologne. It's a nice scent, woody and ironic.

"Don't kill him."

Sal's hope is so desperate it's almost pornographic. He looks at me as if I were a merciful messiah. I am not.

"Give me one good reason," Dante replies, his voice low. He doesn't look at me.

I take another step. I touch the small of his back, feel the expensive fabric of his suit against my palm. He allows it. Unmoving, as if the touch were natural and I could touch him at any time.

Sal watches this. Confusion meets his hope, forming a strange dossier of hyperventilation.

"He's been inside their newest systems," I whisper. I lean against him. "He knows the architecture, the protocols, and maybe some passwords they're too lazy to change. Leave him to me. I'll turn him into a weapon we can point right back at them." I slide my hand further up his back. "Dead men can't talk."

Dante is quiet. It's a long moment, and Sal looks like he's about to faint, closer with every second.

Then, slowly, the gun begins to lower. Not all at once. Millimeter by millimeter.

The hope on Sal's face is an ugly, desperate thing. When the barrel of the pistol finally points to the floor, Sal collapses into a sob of relief.

"Thank you," he chokes out, "thank you, thank you, oh God, thank you…"

"My boy thinks you're still good for something, Sal. Take a good look at him," Dante says. "He's your guardian angel now. You'd better pray he keeps finding you useful."

My boy. I have to bite the inside of my cheek hard to keep from moaning right here, in front of everyone. He's claiming me and it's fucking paradise. I lean in a little more, pressing myself against Dante's back, and Sal sobs, nodding way too fast.

"I-I will be, Mr. Volkov, thank you, thank you, thank—"

A bang. An explosion of gunpowder.

The sound of the gunshot is deafening. I hear a sharp ringing, my body contracts and aches from the shock, and Sal screams an ugly, primitive, pained scream. I didn't see what happened. Only the result: the smoke rising from the barrel of Dante's pistol, Dante holding it with a horrifying calm, and Sal's left hand, which had been tied to the armrest, transformed into a ruined mass of blood and bone. The bullet lodges in the armrest of the chair. It almost goes through.

"Shut the fuck up," Dante says. "Let's make sure you never touch anything of ours again."

He doesn't even wait. He points the pistol at Sal's intact hand, and before Sal can beg him not to, he fires.

Sal's mind, his talent, his only use in this world… it all passed through his fingers. The code he wrote, the systems he hacked, the betrayal he committed. His entire identity was at the tips of his ten fingers, which no longer exist.

I lift my gaze from the disaster that was Sal's hands and look at Dante. He is holstering the weapon, impassive. His calm after an act of such intimate and calculated brutality…

I have never wanted a man so much in my entire life.

Dante turns, and I'm forced to let him go. I didn't want to. He turns his back on the man writhing in the chair and addresses Luca, who watches us with a stone-like expression.

"Take him to our doctor and stop the bleeding. Keep this piece of shit alive. The boy wants him for work."

Luca nods and moves to obey, gesturing for another guard near the door to help him lift the man who is now just a sobbing, bloodied deadweight of flesh.

Dante's attention turns completely to me.

"You," he commands. "With me."

He turns and walks toward the door. I follow him, one step behind, exactly where I belong.

The pain in my ribs is a distant throb now.

We walk down the stairs and corridors past the silent guards who pretend not to see us. He guides me with a certainty that makes me want to melt. I could follow him anywhere.

We stop at my temporary room—the same one a doctor shoved a needle into my arm. He opens the door and gestures inside with his chin. I step in. He doesn't.

"Don't leave until I tell you to," he orders. "Luca will come by later."

I want Dante to come in. To lock the door, to lay his hands on me. To *hurt* me.

"Aren't you staying with me, mister...? You blew a guy's hands off in front of me. You should comfort me."

Amidst his Don-like scowl, a deeper frown appears. Comforting me is an absurd idea for him.

"Don't fuck with me, Nyx."

And he's right. Seeing that had me more turned on than disturbed.

I bite my lip. "Then fuck me yourself."

The sound that escapes him is an irritated grunt mixed with a half-laugh. I see the corner of his mouth lift against his will. Took him by surprise.

"You're unbelievable," he says. I smile, my whole face protesting the movement, as he closes the door and leaves me alone.

I really wanted him with me. But now that he's presented me with a diamond collar—*head of cybersecurity*—this dismissal only postpones the inevitable.

He needs me. And, fuck, I *need* him.

THE TIME PASSES. SOMEONE BROUGHT ME FOOD—*LIQUID* FOOD, AS IF I couldn't open my mouth.

Fuck it. I accept. I'm still floating.

My boy.

The words echo. A stamp, a mark. I sit on the edge of the bed, the expensive mattress sinking under my insignificant weight. My brain is overclocking, analyzing the syntax of that moment. Dante's calm, the way the gun seemed an extension of his will, the calculated brutality with which

he destroyed Sal's hands. *Those hands betrayed us. They won't touch anything else.*

And he did it for me.

The thought makes a low, dirty heat spread through my abdomen.

The door opens without warning.

It's Luca.

He enters holding a glass of water and two white pills in his tattooed palm. The doctor must have left instructions. The obedient soldier, always following orders.

He doesn't look at me. Not really. His gaze sweeps past me, focusing on the wall, the window, anywhere but the aberration sitting on the bed that he saw kiss his boss.

He stops at a safe distance, extending his hand.

"Painkillers," he says. His voice is a low baritone, flat as always, but there's a tension there, an edge that wasn't present before.

I take the pills. I leave them on my tongue, the bitter chemical taste, and take the water. I let them slide down my throat.

Luca remains still, waiting. A stone guard. But stones don't get this uncomfortable.

I watch him. He saw everything. The execution. The claim. The kiss. The way Dante touched me, as if I belonged to him. Luca is Dante's most loyal man, his closest. What does he think when he sees his general, his icon of strength, being touched like that by *me*?

"Want to tell me something, Luca?"

He finally looks at me. Just a second. His brown eyes, usually so impassive, waver.

"The boss's orders were to ensure you took your medicine."

He's deflecting. Cute.

"No, not the orders. *You*. Got something stuck in there, soldier?"

Luca's mask cracks. The muscle in his jaw twitches. He's not used to this, to the intimacy he was forced to witness.

"You've been avoiding looking at me since the warehouse. Your movement pattern has changed. You stop at the door, assess the room, but your field of vision narrows to inanimate objects. You don't include me in your sweep. Curious."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just following orders," he recites. The soldier's mantra.

"It was the kiss, wasn't it?"

He looks away.

I like Luca. He's simple, predictable, loyal. That's why it's so amusing to watch his parameters fail.

"My job is to protect you and the boss," he finally says. "What happens between you two is none of my business."

I nod. I see why Dante trusts him so much.

"Of all the people who could have seen that, I'm glad it was you," I say, before leaning back against the wall. "Thanks for the meds, Luca. And for keeping me alive back there."

Luca doesn't respond. He's also not used to gratitude other than a paycheck.

He clears his throat and looks away.

"Rest, Hays."

He turns and leaves, closing the door behind him.

I lie on the bed, staring at the ceiling. I could live like this. It's infinitely better than anything I've witnessed in the last twenty-three years before Dante.

I *want* to get used to this.

THE FOLLOWING DAYS ARE A GREY AVALANCHE: FIRST, NOTHING. I WAS LEFT to marinate. Luca insisted that *Dante* insisted I should rest. A doctor—the same one who fixed my face—visited me daily, and Luca stood guard at the door most of the time so I wouldn't sneak out. Nothing to do but languish and think about Dante.

Then, an envelope arrived. Discreet, on heavy cardstock, with no sender. Inside, a contract with the Volkov logo.

Dmitry, the family diplomat, is efficient. A formal proposal to be the Head of Cyber Security. My eyes scanned the salary: a number with so many zeros it made me dizzy. I almost dropped the paper. It was obscene. Why so much? Why would I need all that money per month? I didn't sign. It didn't make sense; there was no explanation for why I, who can barely wear dress shoes for more than two hours, would need it.

Finally, Luca brought an expensive suit that looked casual. My size. These weren't the light, comfortable clothes he had left me in the past few days. Office suit.

"The IT division will be reintegrated."

It took me a while to understand he was talking about my old job. I'd even forgotten it existed. *Reintegrating* was a polite euphemism for saying the last living division would be dissolved, its functions absorbed back into the main Volkov empire. Which meant, for me, the end of my monotonous job there. It also meant, for everyone else, unemployment.

So, today, I'm back at my old workplace.

I hadn't shown up for days without explanation, while being beaten in the Malakovs' basement and held captive by Luca in a luxury hotel. An irony. But my boss was no longer Chad. Anyway, I need to collect my things.

My ribs no longer hurt so much from walking. My eyes have some green outlines, consequences of the broken nose slowly disappearing, and Brenda from the reception is no longer there. I pass through the turnstiles directly. The cameras recognize me.

The only lit floor is IT. The department going to the gallows. Cardboard boxes with corporate remains are everywhere. On the last day, the prodigal son returns home.

Luca had told me before dropping me off at the entrance, "Mr. Volkov wishes everything to be in order by the end of the day." In order, of course. Exterminated.

I walk down the hallway. Some familiar faces turn toward me, brimming with a mixture of resignation and despair. And strangeness. I disappeared for a while. They see me, and I see them. Colleagues. Fired. They think I've also been hit, squeezed out. If not for the reintegration, it would be for not showing up for work for a whole week without notice. And I let them think. There's a certain irony in that. While they sink, I float. To the top.

In the middle of that corporate funeral, I find Nicole. She's sitting in her cubicle, shoulders hunched, a cardboard box in her lap. Her brown hair, usually tied back, is loose and disheveled. She's crying.

The thought—*let them sink while I float*—hides. It doesn't feel right with her. An anomaly.

"Nicole." My voice is more direct than usual. She was the most dedicated. Even thinking the printer had a virus.

She lifts her head. Her red, swollen eyes fix on me. Surprise. Shame. "Leo? My God, where have you been? And what… what happened to your face?"

Déjà vu. I ignore it.

"Are you okay?"

The question sounds more like an observation than genuine concern. It's unintentional.

She stares at the cardboard box. It's empty. The collectible miniatures she kept are still on her desk. The colorful post-its are still on the computer. A cemetery of objects.

She gestures to the desk. "I needed this job."

I look at the computer screen in my cubicle. Off. The camera blinks. I look at the security cameras on the ceiling. Maybe Dante wouldn't like this. Maybe he's watching.

It's not the point now.

"I'll get some water."

It's a mechanical decision. She sniffs and nods. The filter is still functional, in the corner of the room, with a pile of disposable cups. I grab one, fill it, and return. Nicole's face is still streaked with tears. She takes the cup with trembling hands.

"They said it would be a *restructuring*," she murmurs, choked up. "What am I going to do now? I have bills, you know? My dad..."

Her voice trails off. I remember what Dante told me. One hundred thousand dollars in debt. Her father had two bypass surgeries. Her mother depends on a pension to survive.

I look at the miniatures on her desk, the little superhero and monster figurines she arranged so carefully. She didn't have the heart to put them in the box.

Behind them, the fern. Mine. Green, beautiful. She took care of it.

"You'll find something," I say. It sounds hollow even to me. I just turned down a salary that could support her family for a decade, maybe more. I float. She sinks. The image is clearer now. And uncomfortable.

She shakes her head. "It's not that easy, Leo. Not for someone who doesn't have... connections. Or… I'm not as good as you." She stops. Then

she looks at me. "What happened to you? You weren't answering your phone, and no one knew about you. Chad was a nervous wreck."

I don't usually look away like this. But I do now. A strange shame crawls up my neck. "I had some health issues."

I like Dante's marks. Even if consequential, like these, which weren't made directly by his hands. I display them with pride. But it feels wrong here. It feels wrong to display them to Nicole. They are a symbol of a privilege that didn't reach her. This bothers me.

"Were you also laid off?" she asks softly.

I shrug. "Looks like it. That's life, isn't it?"

I see other colleagues saying goodbye, some with forced hugs, others with empty handshakes. All with the same look of veiled panic.

"I'll miss your bad jokes, Leo."

She forces a smile. It's the first time in a while that I've seen the real fragility of the world that doesn't bend to the will of the Volkovs.

Nicole used to laugh at anything I said. Most of the time, it wasn't even a joke.

Her gaze wanders around the cubicle, landing on the fern in the corner of her desk. My fern.

"Oh... before I forget." She leans over and picks up the small pot, handing it to me with ceremonial care. "I took care of it for you. Watered it every day. Didn't want it to die just because you were... sick."

I hold the pot. The only living thing on this floor that doesn't know this is the end.

Before I can formulate a reply, a loud, desperate voice cuts through the silence of the floor.

"Leo! Holy shit, man, you're alive! Where did you disappear to?"

Chad. He marches toward us, his hair disheveled by stress, with a cardboard box under his arm. Always the same thing. He completely ignores the boxes, the mass layoff, Nicole's tears.

"You disappear for a week, and we're here thinking you died or something, and then suddenly, BAM! I thought they'd keep the IT department, but they sent everyone packing! Can you believe it?" He throws his box on the floor. "Years of work thrown in the trash! And for what? For some multi-billion dollar subsidiary to swallow us whole!"

He leans in. He puts an arm around my shoulders and pulls me away from Nicole, who just accepts it, at this point. He whispers to me, "In the

middle of all this mess, my headphones went missing. I don't want to accuse anyone, but Nicole's always been quiet, right? Staring at everyone's computer. She was here when they disappeared. Did you see them?"

I stare at him. Yes, the headphones are in my pocket.

"No, Chad. I didn't."

"Keep an eye on her for me, man. If you see anything, let me know."

I just nod slowly. He seems satisfied, as if we've just sealed a pact.

"Thanks, buddy," he says, patting my shoulder. "Shit, I need to find those headphones before they seal the floor."

He walks away, starting to rummage through his own boxes, convinced that Nicole, of all people, stole his crappy headphones.

I don't give him the satisfaction of a second answer. For me, this conversation is over. This *place* is over.

I turn to my cubicle. There's not much I want to take. The pens, the notepads, the technical manuals... they're just remnants of a life that is no longer mine. I look at the dark computer screen, at the Volkov surveillance camera that is, no doubt, recording this exact moment.

I grab an old laptop I kept in the bottom drawer. The key is always in the soil of my fern, which is the only other thing that belongs to me here.

With the fern secure in one arm and the laptop in the other, I walk toward the exit.

I ignore Chad. I pass Nicole, who gives me one last sad look.

"Take care, Leo."

I give her a nod. "You too, Nicole."

I leave behind the cardboard boxes and Chad's voice still complaining about his headphones. As the elevator descends, I stare at the fern's leaves. Her kindness. His stupid concern. Their fragility.

As I pass through the turnstiles for the last time, I don't look back.

Luca waits for me at the door. He looks like a security guard. He looks at my belongings—an old, beat-up laptop and a fern—and says, "Is that all you're taking?"

"It's the only thing that belongs to me."

He seems to want to ask about the plant. He refrains. "The car is waiting."

He leads me to a black armored SUV with raised suspension and immense wheels. The dark leather seats are cold and soft. Even the air

conditioning seems to blow more expensive air, with a faint smell of wood and pepper. Luca and another large man in a suit sit in the front seats.

I watch the city rush by the window. The generic office buildings, the streets full of ordinary people with ordinary problems. Through the armored glass, everything looks like a silent film. A world I no longer belong to.

The car drives for a few minutes in silence, but instead of taking the expressway out of the city, the driver turns toward a familiar neighborhood. *My* neighborhood. The car slows and stops in front of my house. The same grey, depressing building I left behind.

"Mr. Volkov's orders were for you to collect any valuable personal items you wish to keep," Luca says. "The rest will be discarded."

Discarded. The word is so final. So... Dante.

I can't resist a smile.

"He's telling me to pack?"

He wants me to collect the fragments of my pathetic existence and take them to his castle. It's an act of annexation.

Luca opens the door for me. He escorts me into the house without saying anything.

Everything is exactly as I left it. Impersonal, with cheap, lifeless furniture. I don't have much. I grab a backpack. I throw in some clothes, an external hard drive with old projects, and the cryptography book that was on my nightstand. Of course, my personal laptop, which isn't the trash I left at the office. I like to have two—one is for malware. And that's it. The rest are just things.

Luca observes the almost empty backpack. "Just that?"

I look around. The grey house. The grey life.

"Just that."

We return to the car in silence. I throw the backpack on the seat. Now I have a home backpack, an old laptop, and a fern. The mortal remains of Leo Hays.

Luca gets in the car and signals the driver. This time, we take the expressway north.

The journey is silent. Luca and the other guard don't speak. I don't speak. I just watch the landscape transform into trees and, eventually, tall stone walls.

We stop in front of a wrought iron gate, with no identification. A small, discreet camera turns toward us. The gate opens without anyone needing to

say a word. We enter a vast, isolated property, surrounded by dense forest. At the end of a gravel path, a modern house, almost a fortress of glass, concrete, and steel, projects from the landscape like a monument to wealth and isolation.

Definitely not the hotel where they kept me until now.

The car stops under a porte-cochere. Luca gets out and opens my door. "We've arrived."

I step out, still holding my things. The air here is clean, cold. I don't see any guards.

"This is your new residence. And your new workplace," Luca says, guiding me inside.

It's a mausoleum with Wi-Fi. The interior is spacious and cold. Black marble on the floor, polished concrete on the walls. The furniture looks like modern art.

Luca guides me down a long corridor and stops in front of a door that looks like a bank vault. It opens with a fingerprint scanner.

"Mr. Volkov has provided everything you might need."

Of course it was Dante.

It's a fucking bunker. An isolated, hermetic suite. King-size bed in one corner, a metallic kitchen with a stainless steel refrigerator, a five-star hotel bathroom. The windows are floor-to-ceiling armored glass. View of the forest. Beautiful. Silent. No exit. Every detail is exactly where he wanted it.

It's suffocating. But he's the one who brought me here. And it's impossible to hate what he touches.

At the other end of the room is the real reason I'm here: a monstrous workstation. Three curved 49-inch monitors, a custom mechanical keyboard with chrome keys, and a server rack with glass panels and blinking lights.

"Mr. Volkov presumed you'd prefer to set up your own system. But this one is already operational," Luca says, pointing to a state-of-the-art laptop, resting between the monitors like a war jewel. "Dedicated fiber. Triple firewall. Nothing goes in or out without the boss's approval."

The boss's.

I walk to the desk. I don't touch any of it. I leave my beat-up laptop next to the titanium monster Dante thought I deserved. The contrast is pathetic. This is what he wanted. I leave the fern at the edge of the desk, facing the window. The only two objects that survived my previous life. Tiny. Ridiculous. But still alive.

Perfectly placed in the center of the desk, next to the keyboard, is a single black envelope, on heavy cardstock. Written on it in elegant, precise silver calligraphy: *Nyx*.

Luca watches me open the envelope. Inside, a single sheet. A memo: *Malakov Asset Neutralization*. I can hear Svetlana's voice in my head dictating all the guidelines and rules listed in mechanical black ink. Intelligence extraction, psychological warfare, leaking, disposal. It's my first work order.

I lower the paper. I face Luca, who is still standing near the door, tense, waiting to see if any instructions will come. I give him one.

"I need Sal," I say. "Have new hands grown on him yet?"

Luca ignores my wisecrack. "I don't have authorization to move the prisoner. I need to confirm with the boss."

"Then confirm."

My insubordination clearly annoys him, but the order came from me, the new whatever-I-am. He pulls his phone from his suit pocket and types a message, no doubt to Dante.

"Mr. Dmitry also instructed me to collect your service contract," he says, peeking at me before returning to his phone.

I look at the envelope, then at him. Contract. The paper with numbers. I left it exactly where I found it in that hotel room.

"I didn't sign."

Luca stops typing. "Pardon?"

"It would be fiscally irresponsible of me. Svetlana would be horrified by the inefficiency of allocating such a resource to an asset that doesn't use it. It's bad business."

Luca stares at me for a long time. He's trying to understand the logic of it. My only expenses were rent, frozen food, and internet. Dante is giving me an entire life now.

His phone screen flashes. He stares at it. He frowns, clears his throat, and says, "I'll bring the prisoner."

I smile and watch him go.

I'm alone.

Or almost.

His presence lingers. It clings to the walls. To the scent of leather. To the weight of the furniture.

I wanted *him* to be the one to bring me here, introducing me to every space in this suite, giving me his orders to eat and sleep properly.

I allow myself to drown in the scent.

I miss him.

DMITRY IS THE VOLKOV WHO TALKS IN MY EAR THE MOST. FUNNY, BECAUSE I thought it would be his brother. Or I *wanted* it to be.

Since I've been locked in here, Dante hasn't shown up. Not even to scold me for talking to Nicole. I've already asked Luca. He tells me nothing. The most I get from the Volkovs is in daily meetings with Svetlana and Dmitry through a secure channel. Svetlana stays for a short time, gives information, and leaves. She's efficient, doesn't like to waste time. Dmitry is a bit more cordial, and he's the one who discusses the best paths with me. He's a perfectionist, pragmatic, doesn't mind me calling him by his first name, and sometimes laughs at the jokes I make about Sal's hands, who is the ghost in the basement.

By Dante's orders, Luca doesn't leave me alone with our prisoner. I find it funny, because Sal has been reduced to a man who doesn't even have tears or autonomy—a prisoner in every sense of the word. He is thin, weak, always tied to some chair, and definitely doesn't find my jokes funny. Where his hands once were are now bandaged stumps that need changing a few times a day. He doesn't see me as a guardian angel, doesn't thank me for saving his life. He wishes Dante had killed him.

Sal doesn't know it, but his family is alive. Or something like that. He must think they were killed, but Dante kept his promise to protect them, in his own way. They received a generous sum of money, new identities, and a one-way flight to some forgotten place in the Midwest. They made a silent agreement: if they return or say anything about the past, they *truly* disappear. Dmitry told me this one day. I asked out of clinical curiosity.

Meanwhile, Sal gave us everything he had to give for now. He no longer fights, and we don't need extensive blackmail or threats. Deep down, I think Dmitry enjoys his petty, justified revenge. He talks about Sal's children in detail—how he would ruin their lives, hunt them down, dig up every living relative. And he does this knowing exactly where they are: crying for Sal,

yes, but wiping their tears with money inside a hot tub in a mansion in the Midwest.

For today, Luca took Sal away from here. A shame. I even like looking at his fucked-up wrists—it's a reminder of the last time Dante *really* spoke to me. But we're on practical matters and, according to Luca, Dante would prefer Sal to be kept in the dark. *According to Luca*. Everything according to Luca, or according to Dmitry, or according to Svetlana, because Dante is still just a presence in my head, though in constant contact with his list of pillars… which doesn't include me.

The video call with Dmitry is almost over. We finalize the details of the first information leak that will pit Ivan against Alexei. The work is ready to be executed.

"Are we done for today, then?" I ask, trying to keep my voice neutral.

"*Yes. Good job, Nyx*," Dmitry says. "*Dante will like to see these results.*"

Dante will like it. Of course he will. Except he's not here to see it. He hasn't been here at any point.

Well, he's done this before. He keeps me when he wants. But now it's different. I'm not a pet—he *promoted* me for this.

The last time I saw him was in that basement. After he shot Sal's hands. I touched him. I saw the way he looked at me, afterward. There was hunger, but there was something else. Shame? Disgust? Maybe the kiss in the warehouse, in front of Luca, was a mistake. A misstep. Maybe my reaction in the basement disgusted him. I shouldn't have enjoyed watching that. It was inappropriate to ask him to fuck me after he blew off the hands of someone he trusted. But does he care about that? He wanted me there. I don't remember provoking him, this time. Not on purpose.

I force my voice out. A casual question.

"Out of curiosity, Dmitry... why doesn't Dante participate in these meetings? He's the boss."

Dmitry gives me the corporate answer. "*Dante defines the overall strategy. We execute the details. He doesn't need to be on every call. He has other fronts to take care of. The dirtier part.*"

A waste of time. "You don't need to explain the hierarchy to me. Is he avoiding me?"

The direct question catches him off guard. Dmitry sighs, and the answer he gives isn't that of the Volkov executive. It's that of the brother.

"*That's not the word I would use*." He pauses. "*Dante… chooses when to be present. When he's not, it's because he thinks he shouldn't be.*"

He treats me with a cordiality that borders on that of a brother-in-law trying to get along with his brother's problematic boyfriend. Of the three Volkovs, Dmitry is, by far, the most... *welcoming*.

I accept his non-answer. I understand it's the most he'll give me.

"Alright," I say. "About the plan against Alexei... the bait is ready. Sal has given me everything I need. When do we launch?"

Dmitry takes a moment to reply. Maybe he expected more questions, more drama.

"*Svetlana is finalizing the leak package. The evidence is perfect. Sal really outdid himself under your... tutelage*," he says, with a hint of irony. "*We launch tomorrow at noon. By then, the stock markets will be closed for the weekend. It will minimize collateral damage to our holdings*."

"Efficient."

"*We try to be*." I hear the smile in his voice. "*Rest, Nyx. Tomorrow, you'll need a clear head to monitor the chaos we're going to create. And for me to convince you to accept our base salary as operations leaders.*"

Obscene salary. I roll my eyes.

"Fuck you, Dmitry."

He laughs. If it were Svetlana, she'd come here and shoot me in the head.

Then, a hiss and he hangs up.

Silence is back.

Rest, Nyx. As if that were possible.

I slide my chair to my old laptop. The scratched plastic casing, the sticker of an indie band I don't even listen to anymore. A fossil.

I connect it to the network. The Volkov triple firewall greets me. But I'm the new head of security, and every good architect knows the service passages. I create a temporary, untraceable tunnel.

With the information I extracted from Sal, Alexei's secret financial network is no longer so secret. Dozens of accounts, contingency funds, crypto wallets... a labyrinth designed to hide money.

It's automatic, like breathing. Money starts to flow. Thirty transactions.

Seven thousand eight hundred dollars from here, from a "travel expenses" account in the Cayman Islands. Twelve thousand three hundred from another, disguised as a "consulting fee" in Luxembourg. Five thousand

two hundred from a Bitcoin wallet. Four thousand from another. Broken numbers, disguised as operational expenses, bank fees, rounding errors. Noise. It would take weeks, months, for a very good forensic accountant to piece together all these small bleedings and realize they'd been stolen. And by then... it will be too late.

I aggregate everything into a single anonymous wallet. The total comes to just over two hundred thousand. The money passes through three cryptocurrency tumblers, is converted, divided, recombined, and bounces off servers in five countries in less than ten seconds. Clean. Anonymous. Undetectable.

Now, my old company's HR system is still online, in the middle of the data migration I was supposed to oversee. It takes twelve seconds. A quick query to the payroll database, using the administrator credentials Chad wrote on a post-it note under his keyboard.

I have everything. Full name, address, account number, branch.

I fill in Nicole's account details.

Transfer description box. I stare at it. She would think it was money from heaven. A divine miracle.

I hesitate. Why am I even doing this?

I click the description box.

I type the only thing that makes sense.

Thanks for taking care of the fern.

I press Enter.

Transfer completed.

I erase my tracks. The tunnel I created closes. The logs are clean.

I close the lid of my old laptop.

Leo Hays paid his last debt.

I lean back in the chair. It's too comfortable. My back doesn't even hurt. It must be a fortune. My fern, on the edge of the desk, is happy. I caress its leaves. *I know, baby.* Nicole didn't deserve to sink.

Dante would hate it if he knew. But he won't. He's not here. And I did it for myself.

I stare at the window. A dense forest. The feed from one of the thermal cameras shows heat signatures moving among the trees with assault rifles. Dante's invisible guards.

Dante.

If he leaves me alone for another week, I might think about transferring money to Chad too. That would be rock bottom.

The bed is too big for me.

I drag myself to it. The mattress is firm, the sheets are Egyptian cotton that must cost more than my old rent. I lie on one side. The other is untouched. Smooth. Empty. Saved for him.

I close my eyes. The darkness behind my eyelids is where I find him. Now, after the work is done, after closing the door to my old life, my body begins to remember.

My hand slides down, over the fabric of my sweatpants. It's hot. Heavy. Needy.

I see him. His hands, covered in blood, the way he destroyed that man for me. Out of possession. The image is so vivid I can smell blood and gunpowder in the air. I moan softly against the pillow.

My boy. His voice. The way he claimed me. The memory makes my dick throb harder. I move faster.

The friction of my hand is a pathetic comfort, a cheap imitation. I don't want my hand. I want *his*, still stained with another man's blood. Grabbing my hair hard enough to make my eyes water. Squeezing my throat until the world blacks out. I want him holding me, immobilizing me, using me as an object, just a tool for his pleasure, for his rage. I want to be the receptacle of all his darkness.

The thought pushes me to the limit. The memory of him, fucking me against the shower wall, the hot water, the steam, the pain...

"Dante," the name escapes unintentionally.

My body convulses. It's a spasm that doesn't last long. What's left is worse than before.

It's not enough. It's never enough without him.

I wonder how much longer he'll make me wait.

THREE MONITORS DISPLAY A MOSAIC OF INFORMATION: ENCRYPTED communication feeds from the Malakovs, financial trackers, traffic cameras in Brighton Beach.

At 11:59, the room is in absolute silence.

At noon, I press Enter.

The "leak" package—the fabricated evidence, the fake emails, the transfer records—is anonymously delivered to Ivan Malakov's personal servers.

The first hour is silent. Ivan is reading. Processing. Believing.

Then, an alert on my financial monitor. One of Alexei's shell holdings suffers a hostile takeover attempt.

I watch, fascinated. I see the panic messages on Alexei's communication channels. I see confused orders being given. I see an alert on the local news about a "gas explosion" at a luxury restaurant in Brighton Beach—one of Alexei's favorites. I intercept an internal communication from Ivan's men bragging about taking over three betting houses. A police feed reports a car bomb at the address of a known Alexei lawyer. Alexei moves millions between accounts in the Cayman Islands. An anonymous tip leaks the location of one of Ivan's arsenals to the police.

I barely need to get my hands dirty. The Malakovs cannibalize each other.

The violent outburst in Brighton Beach only subsides by the end of the day. Their war will continue for weeks, but the threat to us has been effectively neutralized. Alexei is careful. He won't make efforts to avenge what happened in that warehouse while his own family is trying to cut his throat.

A notification flashes on my main monitor. An encrypted video call. *Dmitry Volkov*. I accept.

The screen splits. On one side, Dmitry, in his impeccable office, a glass of whiskey in his hand and a rare smile of satisfaction on his face. On the other, Svetlana, the image coming from a laptop camera, against the backdrop of a luxury hotel room somewhere in Europe. Her expression is, as always, indecipherable.

"*Nyx. As you can see... your plan was an absolute success,*" Dmitry says. He raises his whiskey glass, toasting with a ghost. "*More than we expected, to be honest.*"

Svetlana looks away from the screen. Surely reading reports. She says, "*Ivan Malakov's infrastructure in Brighton Beach is collapsing. He's losing control of his docks. Alexei has moved eighty percent of his liquid assets out of the country. They're too focused on each other to worry about us for the foreseeable future.*"

Dmitry laughs. He doesn't hide his satisfaction. *"When the dust settles, you and I will have a real whiskey. I have a bottle of Pappy Van Winkle saved to celebrate the family's newest and most valuable acquisition.*"

It's the most sincere form of cordiality I could expect from him. *Welcome to the Volkovs*.

"I don't drink whiskey, Dmitry. But I'll make an exception."

"*Consider it part of your new benefits package.*"

Svetlana interrupts before Dmitry can make another gentle boss joke. "*And the secondary asset? Sal? What's the status of his data extraction?*"

"We're almost done. He still has a few secrets, but he's being very cooperative."

"*Excellent. For now, then*," she says, *"your next step is to compile the logs from the Croatian holding's systems. We need to know what Ivan has already lost."*

She adjusts her glasses. No congratulations or thanks.

"Of course," I say. Working isn't bad. It keeps my head functional.

But Dmitry disagrees. "*Sveta, give him the night off*," he says, smiling at the corner of his mouth. "*He deserves it.*"

"*Rest is a luxury we don't have, Dmitry. The window of opportunity to exploit their weakness is now.*"

"She's right," I say, leaning into the microphone. "Give me access to the logs. I can finish this in a few hours."

Anything to not be alone with my own head, because a foolish part of me was hoping. Hoping for *him*.

Dmitry shakes his head. He still speaks lightly, but it's definitive now, "*No. The order came from above.*"

Svetlana stays quiet. She frowns, thinking, trying to remember. She didn't know. Neither did I.

Dmitry continues, looking at me. "*Dante was clear. He said you needed a night. He's taking one himself.*"

On screen, I see the exact moment Svetlana's patience runs out. It's the slowest, most tired eye-roll I've ever seen.

I'd like to know what she's thinking. Why is Dante taking a day off? Is it because of me? Did the war exhaust him? Is he so psychologically fucked up because of what happened that he needs time alone?

"*Enjoy your forced day off, Nyx*," Dmitry says. He must have had a little to drink. He's warmer. "*Use the time to think about a counter-proposal for*

your contract. The offer is still on the table."

I had almost forgotten.

"Every day this, Dmitry," I complain.

He, of course, laughs. At some point, I won't be able to escape. He needs everything formalized like humans need oxygen.

"*Good night, Nyx.*"

A hiss. He hangs up. Svetlana's screen darkens a second later, without a goodbye. Efficient even in her rudeness.

I take off my headphones. Unlike Chad's, at the bottom of my backpack, these are good. But it doesn't make a difference now. The silence is the same as always.

A war won. Dmitry, one of the most influential men in the city, invited me for whiskey with him. Expensive, aged whiskey. High society stuff.

Still, I'm alone.

Dante isn't here to see the victory. He isn't here to give me the next order.

The admiration, the kiss in the warehouse, the way he called me "my boy"... it all seems like a fever dream. Maybe I crossed a line. Maybe, now that he has me back, safe and useful, the interest is gone. I said I loved him. A stupid word. A mistake.

I sit on the bed. I don't like this. It's a burning I don't know how to face, it's new. What the fuck. This didn't happen before. When Dante left me, when he tried to get rid of me, when he pushed me away. It was empty, hollow; nothingness, not this shapeless burning that spreads.

I go to the window. Outside, only the trees and the invisible guards. I wonder if they recognize me as part of the house, or just as Dante's project.

Then, a sound. Low, almost nothing. It's because of the silence that it's so obvious. A metallic click. The door.

I turn. Slowly.

Him.

The silhouette appears first. The blazer hanging on his shoulders, the vest still buttoned, the tie loose. He says nothing. Just closes the door behind him, locks it.

"You won a war today."

His voice is hoarse. As if he'd been smoking, or talking too much to people he hates.

He takes his watch off his wrist. He puts it on the dresser.

"You sent me a night off," I say. "Did you come to put me to sleep?"

He approaches.

"Do you want to sleep?"

"I want you."

He doesn't react. He looks at me with that intensity that melts my bones.

Then I confess, "If your plan was to leave me alone until I became docile, it worked."

He stops a step away from me. He frowns, not understanding what this absence did to me. Maybe he didn't expect it to create more submission. Maybe he doesn't know I'd do *anything*. I *want* him to know.

"You think I ignored you?" he says. The same threatening tone from all my fantasies. Fuck. My whole body trembles. "If I had walked through that door a day earlier, Nyx... with the rage I was feeling and the way you look at me... your broken rib would have punctured your lung."

My legs almost give out. It's a relief. There's no regret in the way he looks at me. No disgust, no disagreement. When he pushed me away at that hotel, he was genuinely concerned. Concerned about using too much force, hurting me too much. He cares, and I almost want to laugh. I *want* him to hurt me too much. The concern is an aphrodisiac.

Was he following the medical reports? Did he wait for me to describe no acute pain to the doctor? Did he wait for the doctor to clear sudden movements?

I touch his tie. Loose. "So why are you here now, Dante?" I whisper. "Do you think I'm healed enough for you?"

I take his hand—the same one that punched that man's face into a mass of flesh, the same one that held the gun that blew off Sal's hands—and bring it below my chest, placing it over my broken rib. I press his hand against it.

For a second, nothing happens. Dante's hand remains rigid under mine. I challenge him in silence, at the same time I plead. *Please. Don't push me away.*

His jaw clenches. It's instantaneous with the tremor in his hand. His fingers slowly firm up, until his hand is pressing against my body. He squeezes.

The pain is a sharp explosion. I don't fight it. I lean in, offering more, and I can't suppress the sound—a low, breathless moan, a mixture of pain and a pornographic relief.

His breathing is heavy. His eyes darken.

"Fuck, Nyx..." he growls.

His fingers tighten, and I have to grab his shoulders to keep from falling.

"I was trying," he says, gravely. "Not to fucking lose control."

It's a confession. The rawest and most honest he's ever given me. He was keeping himself away. For me. The world spins. He is all I can cling to.

"Do you know how many times I touched myself these last few days?" I whisper. Shameless. "Thinking about it. About you. About your voice. About your hands on me."

My hand slides from his chest, down his torso, and stops at the cold buckle of his belt. I hook a finger there.

"I can't stop thinking about it," I confess. "You can break my ribs, Dante. I won't stop you."

He lowers his hand from my rib to my waist. In a second, he lifts me, as if I weighed nothing. I wrap my legs around him, hold his shoulders to anchor myself, and he walks to the bed with a delicious impatience.

I missed this. His body is a wall, exuding heat.

He pushes me onto the mattress. The ache in my bones feels good—*anything* caused by him is good. He climbs on top of me, tearing off his blazer in a hurry. I slide my hands over his shoulders, help him get rid of it, and he allows it. He throws the thousand-dollar blazer on the floor like trash and thrusts himself over me.

I pull his tie with one hand. He leans closer, and quickly undoes it. The fabric slides between our fingers until he throws it on the floor.

He kisses me. Finally. Without gentleness, without warning. It's a deep, wet kiss, marked by his teeth grazing my lips, and by the metallic taste of some old rage.

I moan against his mouth, and he swallows me. Everything in me bends to receive him.

I want to see him. I want everything. I pull back with my legs still wrapped around him.

"Let me see you," I ask. My voice comes out strained, a sigh. "Please."

He stares at me for a second. As if considering if I deserve it.

Then, slowly, with a perverse solemnity, he undo the buttons of his shirt.

One by one.

I stop breathing.

One. Another. His shoulders, his chest—broad and defined. His skin is marked by old scars and tattoos I've never seen. Black ink, military lines, dates, acronyms. Some faded by time. Others covered by scars. One in particular, on the left side of his chest, looks like a knife wound. Fused to his flesh as if it were part of him.

All belong to him. Stories he'll never tell me.

The fabric of the open shirt slides down his arms, but he doesn't take it off. He leaves it hanging, loose. He knows exactly what he's doing to me.

"Fuck..." I whisper.

I want to touch everything, trace every line, memorize every damage they've tried to inflict on him.

He is violence in the form of a man. And yet, he's here. Above me. *Allowing* me to see.

"May I?" I whisper, hovering a hand over his skin.

That look in his eyes...

I run my hand over his skin like someone caressing a sacred altar. I feel the hardness of his muscles, the uneven texture of the scars. I feel smaller beneath him. And at the same time, more alive than I have ever been.

"You are..." I moan in supplication. "Fuck, Dante."

"I am what?"

That intonation sends an obscene heat between my legs.

I swallow hard. My words fail me. I want to call him my salvation, my monster, my personal hell. I want to beg. I want to thank him. But no word seems sufficient for what he is. For what he is to me.

I say the only thing that makes sense upon seeing him. What he is.

"My god."

I lean forward, ignoring the pain in my ribs. My lips find the skin of his chest, and I kiss the edge of an old scar. His skin is sacred.

"I worship you," I whisper. I feel his heartbeat quicken against my palm.

"Then pray, Nyx. Pray to me."

He entwines his fingers in the hair at the nape of my neck and pulls, dragging me to the edge of the bed. I don't fight. I surrender completely.

He forces me off the bed, throwing me to the floor. The impact of my knees on the marble hurts.

I look up at him, who now looms over me like a monolith. A god looking from his altar at his miserable creation. His shirt is still open, his chest marked by scars and ink. A fucking god.

"On your knees. Like a good devotee."

I obey without hesitation. I kneel before him. An offering.

His gaze sweeps over my body, assessing my submission. The satisfaction on his face is the most erotic thing I've ever seen.

He unzips his pants, and I see him, hard and throbbing. I don't need any more commands. I lean forward, rest my palms on his thighs, and open my mouth.

He doesn't order me. I know what to do. I take him whole, relaxing my throat, letting the metallic depths of his taste flood my tongue. He grabs my hair with one hand, using it to guide my head, to dictate the rhythm.

He forces me deeper. I can't suppress the moan, the gag reflex in my throat. His dick pulses. He likes it when I gag, when I run out of breath.

"Look at me."

I obey, lifting my tear-filled eyes to face him. His face is contorted in pure pleasure and dominance. Knowing I'm the cause of this does things to me.

Then, suddenly, he pulls me back. He moves away from me, leaving me gasping, my chin dripping saliva.

"Bed. Now," he orders.

I get up, my knees aching from the cold marble, and drag myself to the bed, lying on my back with my legs open for him.

He climbs over me, pinning me down. Quickly, with a desperate haste, he drags my pants down. I lift my hips, helping him, and I expect him to invade me all at once, but he stops. He leans in, kisses my neck, makes me melt before he bites. Hard. I grab the back of his shirt, and the pain radiates in waves of heat across my collarbones, my ribs. It leaves my lips as a loud, breathless moan; the pain activates every molecule in my body, makes them pulse for him.

He increases the pressure of his teeth for a second, and then, eases, kissing the spot he just marked. Blood wells up on my skin. He pulls back, his teeth stained with my blood.

"Can you take it?" he whispers. It's the closest thing to care he can offer me in the midst of his fury. He's chosen a new place to break me. And he's checking if I'm still with him.

I nod, panting, unable to form words.

"Look at me," he orders. He grabs my chin, forces me. "Do you want this?"

"Yes," I say. "Yes, fuck, please..."

I can take anything he wants to give me.

He grabs my thighs. Grips them hard enough to leave marks, forces them open, and pulls me closer. He positions himself between them, brushes against me.

I arch, ready, desperate. But he doesn't move.

He stares at me. His jaw is locked. His eyes are dark as crude oil.

"Do you need me to prepare you?" The words come out like a threat. "Or do you want it the way I know you like it, hm? You want it to hurt?"

My dick pulses. I moan.

"Just like this... Like always, Dante," I whisper, panting. "I want you to hurt me."

"Of course you do," he snarls, and the way he spits the words undoes me. "You filthy slut."

Without another warning, he drives into me. Deep. I clutch the sheets, his shirt, anything I can grab. My muscles protest the invasion, the pain splitting me in two. This is what I want. He grunts, and the sound nearly makes me come. I feel him tight, deep inside me, and it's torture. Paradise.

I let go of his shirt. I take his hand from my hips and guide it over my abdomen to the exact spot where the pain is sharpest. Where the rib is broken.

"Here," I whisper. "Squeeze."

He stiffens. It's a line he doesn't want to cross.

I press his hand down. Force it against the place that hurts the most. "Please," I beg. "I need it to be you."

"You're a fucking sick son of a bitch," he snarls through his teeth, and he does it. He squeezes.

Fuck. *Fuck*. I can't think. His hand presses down on the goddamn bone as if he wants to shatter it all over again. The world disappears. The pain is so violent it undoes me—it *burns* me, *explodes* inside me. It's too much, it's *perfect*, it's *this*. This. It hurts, so it's real. It's *his*.

He fucks me hard. The pain echoes through my entire body, from every direction. I don't know where the suffering begins and the ecstasy ends. Maybe there's no difference.

"You're no good," he mutters, as if he hates what he's doing. As if he hates how much he wants this too. "You like it. You motherfucker. You like this."

I love it when he curses at me. It gives me chills. The combination makes my head spin, and nothing but the feeling of him, the *touch* of him, clouds my mind. My muscles clench, letting him know exactly what his voice does to me, what his hands do, pressing *right there*. He grunts and pulls my thigh, drawing me closer. He leans against my neck.

"You have no idea how much I've wanted you these last few days," he whispers. "How many times I had to stop myself from breaking down that door and fucking that filthy mouth of yours, you miserable slut."

I moan against his shoulder. "You should have."

"Shut up."

His hand moves up to my face. He pulls back just enough to force me to look at him. His eyes bore into mine, hard, torn.

"Look what you make me do," he spits the words, low, threatening. "Look at the fucking animal you create."

Yes.

The sound of our skin slapping together. The scent of his expensive cologne. The sight of his sculpted body. The sharp pain in my rib.

The world dissolves. The room disappears. Only he exists.

It's a short circuit. A blue screen. For a second, I don't exist. I come, feeling the sticky threads spread across my abdomen. My muscles, my whole body contracts, and I hear a deep growl. Him, being squeezed by my body. He grips my thigh hard, slides his thumb over my rib.

He spills into me, as deep as he can go. I feel it—warm, he vibrates, spasms, and soaks my insides. I clutch his shirt until he has flooded me, until the sounds become wetter, until he slides out with an obscene slickness.

He lies down beside me. The white fog that took over my senses slowly fades, and I'm back in bed, listening to his breathing. Smelling his cologne.

I turn to look at him. He's calmer, but that face is threatening from any angle. I love it. He's watching me, analyzing me.

I move, forcing my torso up. I want him closer, but a sharp sting stops me. This isn't like when he squeezes. This is just annoying.

"Ah, fuck," I curse unintentionally.

Dante frowns. The irritation is back in his eyes. He props himself up on an elbow, his gaze falling to my torso. "The rib?"

I nod. A deep breath only makes the stabbing pain worse.

"It's inflamed again, I think."

He touches it. Not like before; this time, it's careful, almost clinical.

"I squeezed too hard."

He's alarmed. Worried. The man who broke my molar because I pissed him off, who fucked me against a shower wall, and who just used me like I was his private property, is now worried that our fucking might have worsened a rib someone else broke. I can't get used to this.

I laugh. It hurts, but I laugh anyway.

"What the fuck are you laughing at?" he mutters. He already knows where this is going.

"Haven't we had this conversation before?"

He huffs.

"I'll call the doctor," he says, reluctantly.

He sits up and starts to turn. I stop him before he can leave the bed.

"No, no, no," I plead. I stretch out, swallowing the pain to reach and grab his wrist. I don't want to be in this room without him. "Don't leave me alone again."

He stops. He looks at my hand holding him, then at my face. It's an honest plea. I'll go crazy if he leaves.

Then, his body turns back to me. He gives in. He shows mercy.

Relief.

"I kept one side of the bed untouched," I say. I lie back down, pressing on my ribs—throbbing, burning—as if it helps suppress the pain from the effort. "Waiting for you."

He looks at me with soft eyes. They're new to me.

"I did the risk analysis. The probability that you had... grown tired of me was high."

He shakes his head. It's involuntary. "Nyx, I can't get your fucking voice out of my head. I stayed away so..." he stops. He gestures towards my ribs, "...*this* wouldn't happen."

I smile. How strange, to have Dante Volkov's concern. Depriving himself so I could recover.

"I was hoping we could talk," he says softly. Intimately.

He should have known I'd *need* him, especially after days alone. But he hesitated before putting his hands on me. It's true.

I smile. "Good to know I can still mess up your plans."

My voice comes out soft, too. On its own. My body yields to him, I respond to him, I *reciprocate*. Anything.

"No more games, Leo," he says. My heart nearly stops. *Leo*. It sounds sacred in his voice. "The noise... in my head. It came back when you were taken. Worse than ever." He stares at me. Beyond the fury and desire, I see a contained fear. "I don't function properly without you."

He pauses. Admitting it seems to cause him pain.

"But I can't give you a normal life. Peace. What I have to offer you is... this. Blood, violence, and a monster in your bed."

I can't breathe.

"Is that enough for you?" he says.

I can't fucking breathe.

I don't know how to answer that. He's cornered me. A simple *yes* is inadequate—he's offered me an *immensity*.

I force my body to move. I push my torso up, propping myself on the mattress, and I lean in. "Fuck, Dante." I get closer. The pain rips a grunt from me, but I would *crawl* to have him nearer. I climb on top of him, feel his hands automatically grip my waist. "Fuck." I sit on his lap, resting my arms on his shoulders.

He sees me wince in pain. He whispers, "Careful," as he steadies me, holds me. The word is so unexpected, so absurdly tender coming from him.

I slide my hands to his face. I hold him—ignoring the pain, ignoring everything but his eyes, his skin.

"I fucking love you," I whisper.

He frowns, but not with anger. Softly, he says, "It's not love, Nyx. It's uglier than that."

It's absurd. How could I not recognize the *one thing* that shatters my monotony, the one thing that causes any kind of chemical reaction in my head besides pain? I smile, pressing our lips together. "Fine. Then it's not love. It's... *inevitability*. It's fucking *physics*. Call it whatever you want. But stay with me."

The fight in Dante's eyes fades.

All the fury, all the hesitation, all the walls he built around himself... it all comes crumbling down. He sighs, a sound of exhaustion, of an internal war that has finally ended.

"I'm not going anywhere," he says.

I kiss him. Slow, deep, a seal on the silent pact we've just made.

When we pull apart, he keeps his forehead pressed to mine. His gaze is still warm, but the usual shadow is there, slowly returning.

"But if you make me regret this..."
His hand slides to my throat. A light squeeze. A reminder.
"...not even God will save you."
I laugh.
Perfect.
If hell has a master, he's lying next to me.
And I've never felt so at home.

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EPILOGUE

LEO

I'VE MADE a few discoveries these last few months. Even after countless repaintings, cigarette stains are very persistent. They know I don't really want them gone.

Waking up and looking at the ceiling used to be just that: waking up and looking at the ceiling. Now, it's waking up and looking at a discreet, stubborn nicotine and tar stain a few inches to the side of my vision, right where Dante usually sleeps. And smokes. The smoke clings to the walls, the ceiling, the windows, and the upholstery. The whole room smells of tobacco.

Once, Dmitry set foot in here and grimaced. "Do you smoke?" he asked. Their intelligence report on my vices—and lack thereof—was a bit outdated, he thought. Maybe the stress of the job had gotten to me. Depressed people are twice as likely to smoke as chemically healthy people. True.

My neurotransmitters are still completely out of whack—this shit is chronic—but I said, "No." I was surprised he even *noticed* the smell because, in my head, all the Volkovs smell like cigarettes and have long lost

the ability to perceive it. My mistake. They smell like cigarettes because *Dante* smells like cigarettes, and the scent sticks to you, embraces you like a haunting.

Dmitry tilted his head at me, and I saw the exact moment he understood. His eyebrows shot up, he subtly tucked his chin, and he seemed a little desperate to change the subject. I almost called him over. *Come and see, Dmitry, the smell is much stronger in my bed.*

The yellowish-gray stain makes my mornings happy. Even when Dante gets up before me. I think, *it's real*. This god in human form is really spending all his nights in my bed. Most of the time, doing a little more than just sleeping next to me.

Sometimes, too, I don't need to look at the stain on the ceiling. I *feel* him. Behind me, holding my waist; *beneath* me, his heartbeat in my ears; or just with his back against mine. That last one is less frequent. Dante is a possessive guy. He likes to make sure I won't move away from him without him noticing.

And that's another thing I discovered: if a feather falls to the floor, Dante will wake up instantly, pulling a pistol from under the mattress. It's automatic, an irrational impulse. It doesn't matter what it is. I didn't even know there was a gun under the mattress. I asked him after the first time if there was any remote chance of that gun going off one night. He looked at me like I was an animal. We have this wall between us—he knows everything about guns and ways to kill people and punching them. I don't. He said, "The hammer isn’t cocked, you imbecile." I don't know what that means. But it's a testament of trust: knowing the gun is there, that he leaves it with me when he's gone, and that he trusts I won't use it against him. Or myself.

Overall, having Dante and this morbid smell of cigarettes helps me sleep. It's never been easy for me to stay still for enough hours without my sleep being choppy, but it gets a little better with him. At least, most of the time, he's the one who wakes me up—Dante's sleep quality is the worst imaginable, no matter how much he acts like *mine* is the problem. I don't have anything that messes with my head enough to make me wake up drenched in sweat, breathless, with a racing heart and a surge of norepinephrine. He does.

It happens often. I don't get startled anymore. He shoots up in bed, grabs the same hidden gray gun, and I wait for him to find himself again. It

doesn't take long. His eyes refocus within a few seconds, but the things that haunt his mind linger for much longer. He usually gets up, takes a cigarette from the pack he's started leaving in my drawers, and goes to smoke on the balcony. They are ghosts I will never know.

I've joined him on the balcony a few times. Most of them, he says nothing. "Do you want to talk?" I asked him once, and he didn't look at me. All he said was, "No."

I never pushed. I learned that his silence after the nightmares is a wall you shouldn't try to climb. Now, I just keep him company. When Dante wakes up like that, we just stay silent, and when we go back to bed, we're silent too. It takes a while for him to relax. And when he does, it's the only time he seems truly vulnerable.

This morning, for some reason, I wake up before him. He's holding me by the waist, and I noticed some time ago that the relationship between the perimeter of my waist and the width of his hand is offensive. I measured it one night, out of morbid curiosity: his hand covers it almost entirely, from side to side.

I nestle closer to him. It's cold this morning, and Dante's body is always warmer than mine. I still prefer him to those Hungarian goose-down comforters—as much as I insist I don't want them, all the Volkovs persistently try to drown me in overpriced luxury, even though I'd be satisfied even in a filthy basement if Dante were with me.

I prepare to go back to sleep. The room is brightening with the daylight outside. It must be early morning—just past dawn—or Dante wouldn't still be here.

That's when a vibration starts. Low, against the wood of the dresser opposite my side of the bed. His phone.

Dante grunts against my hair. He tightens his grip on me. I see the reflex—his hand flying under the mattress and stopping halfway as he realizes: it's just the phone.

The vibration continues. Insistent.

Svetlana, for sure. The only one with the nerve.

After a full minute of torture, with no one saying anything, the phone stops. Silence returns. I almost sigh in relief.

Then, from the nightstand beside me, my phone starts to ring. It used to be on silent mode all the time, but with the Volkovs, I was forced to change that. A missed call from Svetlana always meant a huge lecture. Now I regret

it. My ringtone is loud and shrill on purpose, the annoying kind. It makes my head hurt. It's too early for this.

Dante curses without moving away from me. "What the fuck is that?"

I love how his voice sounds when he wakes up. Deeper, hoarse.

I try to remember. Today isn't a day off. So I reach for the phone purely out of obligation. With the Volkovs, schedules don't matter much either. I've been summoned at questionable hours more times than I can remember.

The name "Svetlana Volkov" glows on the screen.

"Yeah?" I answer. My voice is still a little thick with sleep.

"*Leonel*," she says, with no ‘good morning’. "*Put your boyfriend on. The idiot refuses to answer his own phone and we have a problem with customs in Rotterdam that needs his attention.*"

Your boyfriend. She intones it like an offense.

Like Dmitry, she's also noticed. In fact, she noticed even *before* him and has protested at every possible opportunity.

At the beginning of the year, she said I was a statistical anomaly. Asked if I was going to throw myself off a bridge when Dante got tired of me. She also asked how Dante had never killed me, considering how often, and I quote, I am "inappropriately disrespectful". According to Dante, the initial impression I gave her was that of a vulnerable and cordial boy, but that image crumbled with each new interaction. Good. Since then, she's made her opinion my problem.

In March, she told me I was too young to understand that intensity burns out fast. As if the age difference between us was decades. It's seven years. She predicted that, in a month, Dante would be tired of his new toy.

In May, she was perplexed that whatever Dante and I had was still going on. She told me I was proving myself to be a very valuable yet very unstable asset, and then I heard her yelling at Dante somewhere in the mansion about the black eye he'd given me the night before (which had also made me come, but she didn't find out about that part).

In June, she cornered me in a hallway after a meeting. This was after I convinced Dante to use a rival as an infiltrator instead of killing him. She said Dante listens to me, therefore I am a problem, because he could make a bad decision *because* of me and the *mind control abilities* she invented for me.

Last month, she gave up the fight. She had to notice at some point that the toy had moved into the dollhouse and redecorated the whole damn

thing. She decided to include me in her calculations and attempts to keep Dante on track—she talks to me when she thinks he's overdoing something and making the wrong decision. Which is a little funny because, although Dante does listen to me, he's *still* Dante Volkov. That means telling him what to do is completely out of the question. The best I can wish for her is *good luck with that.*

Calling him my boyfriend is the most explicit acknowledgment she's ever given me. Even if it's laced with disgust. She knows that in the nights and early mornings, he's in my bed. The fastest way to him, now, is through me.

I lift my phone and tilt it back toward Dante. "It's for you. Your sister." I crane my neck to try to see him. "She said you're my boyfriend."

He grunts. But he doesn't protest. At some point, he started to accept it too.

He snatches the phone from my hand. "Why the fuck are you calling him?"

I nestle back into the pillows. Dante starts speaking Russian, which usually happens when they're talking among themselves or when they're fighting. Now, it's both.

I turn to face him, and he adjusts to hold me, without even paying attention. It's become so natural he doesn't have to.

I rest my head on his chest and trace one of his tattoos. I like listening to him speak Russian. I don't understand a word, but it's his voice. I could listen to it for hours.

I should ask him to teach me. We wouldn't tell Svetlana. She'd never know I understand.

I close my eyes. The anger in his voice is my favorite lullaby.

Yeah. Life is good.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART'S ANNUAL CHARITY GALA IS, according to Svetlana, "a strategic obligation for the maintenance of our philanthropic facade".

Dante said there would be people from network security summits, bankers, and front-company CEOs who pretend they don't launder money.

He told me to smile, pretend I don't hate all of them, and, if asked, to flaunt that I'm responsible for their digital infrastructure. It would make a lot of people uncomfortable and would be a power play. That's the official version.

The *unofficial* version is that Dante wants me where he can see me.

At night, Luca takes me to a Volkov mansion where Svetlana and Dante are getting ready. I find them in the bedroom—Svetlana is inside a huge closet with sliding mahogany doors, and Dante is finishing adjusting a solid-colored tie in front of the mirror. Besides the cigarette, the room smells of expensive perfume; a strong mix of plum, from her, with something of black pepper and smoke, definitely his.

I stop at the threshold. He sees me in the mirror's reflection. Luca had given me a very expensive suit to wear before I came, and Dante's eyes sweep over my body, assessing the suit, the fit. I lean against the wall. I admire him. He's always beautiful, but for public events, he looks especially delicious.

The closet door slides open. Svetlana emerges in a long, tight black dress that molds her body like a malevolent queen. She's still putting on an earring, a large ornament with a generous polished diamond. She walks in a hurry to the same mirror Dante is using, but she stops midway. She sees me, stops adjusting the earring. Frowns.

She walks quickly towards me. She drops the earring on the dresser beside me and her hands fly to the top buttons of my shirt—I'd left them open. I don't like collars; they suffocate me.

She immediately fastens them.

"Hide that shit," she says with a grimace. I look down.

Ah. The marks.

Purple and yellow bruises mingle with teeth marks on my collarbone. Souvenirs from the last few nights. I think they're beautiful. Svetlana, clearly, disagrees.

"We need people to take us seriously tonight," she says.

I shrug. "I like to keep them curious."

She gives me a dry look. "You'll be surrounded by corporate spies and undercover federal lawyers." She tightens my collar forcefully. "This can't show."

I smile. "By 'this', do you mean my neck or my psychological problems?"

"Both."

She steps away, grabs her earring, and goes to the mirror. Dante is still there, and he hasn't said a thing the whole time, but his gaze follows me in the mirror—when Svetlana touches me, when I speak, when I smile.

I cross my arms. "Are you going to give me orders too, *boss*?"

He pulls a black suit jacket from the back of a nearby chair. He approaches. And puts it on me. I extend my arms to help him, shamelessly enjoying that his hands are on me again. He adjusts the shoulders of the suit, slow, firm, possessive. He fastens the lapel of my jacket with military precision. My body heats up.

"Fix that collar," he orders. His hand goes to my collarbone, and instead of hiding it hastily like his sister, he gently pulls the shirt fabric, just enough to cover the marks. The touch lingers too long.

That hand. The same one that pulls my hair while he undoes me. The same one that squeezes my neck and suffocates me until my vision darkens. The same one that grabs my hips and leaves them bruised, the same one that holds my thighs and opens me up as if wanting to tear my skin.

Fuck. He's just fixing my clothes. But I search for any sign that he's going to throw me against this dresser and rip this suit off before we even walk out that door.

He knows the effect he has on me. Of course he knows. He knows that a simple touch like this makes me fantasize about being fucked against this very mahogany wall, with his sister waiting for us in the next room.

His breathing becomes heavier. He's going to—

Dante's hand, which was on my lapel, suddenly tightens. His fingers dig into my shoulder, a painful grip that pulls me back to reality.

"I can feel your fucking hard-on against my leg," he growls against my ear, low enough for Svetlana not to hear. "Get yourself together. Now. Or I'll leave you locked in this room until the fucking event is over."

His threat, whispered and dirty, is a gallon of gasoline thrown on the fucking fire. The heat in my groin intensifies. The promise of being locked in here, punished by him... is the most exciting thing I've heard all night. *Get yourself together,* he says. Impossible. The only thing I can think about is how *hot* it would be to be disobedient.

I take a deep breath, trying to force air into my lungs, trying to force the blood away from my cock. I straighten my posture, forcing my muscles to obey. My face is burning. But Svetlana is here. And the event.

Dante lets go of me and steps back, the mask of the Volkov Don perfectly in place again. He turns to the mirror as if nothing happened.

I peek at Svetlana in the reflection. She didn't hear the whisper, but she saw the touch, my reaction, Dante's corrective grip. The expression on her face is one of deep, weary disgust.

She turns away from us, trying to salvage a shred of professionalism for the night. She picks up a pair of prescription glasses from the dresser—from a collection of five different frames. The frame she chooses is thin, gold, and a style a '90s executive would wear.

I watch her put on the glasses. The image is so offensive to my aesthetic sense that I can't hold back.

"You're not going to wear those, are you?" I say.

Svetlana glares at me. "Pardon me?"

"That frame," I say, approaching. "It screams 'middle-aged accountant in crisis'. You're a fucking Volkov. You look like you're about to present a spreadsheet at an HR conference."

Svetlana could kill me with her eyes.

"My choice of frames is not open for discussion, Leonel. *Especially* not by you."

"Didn't you say we need to be taken seriously tonight?" I retort, stopping beside her in front of the mirror. "No one's going to take a woman seriously who looks like she's about to present the quarterly financial results using Microsoft PowerPoint from 2003. That black frame in the case is infinitely superior."

She remains silent. Her eyes dart to Dante's reflection, waiting for him to intervene, to put me in my place.

I look at his reflection too. Dante doesn't move a muscle, but I see it. He's enjoying this. There's an almost imperceptible lift at the corner of his mouth.

Another one of my lessons learned: I can bust Svetlana's balls. It's fun, because she can't do anything about it as long as Dante is on my side and my work for them remains impeccable. She definitely hates me.

I decide to push a little more. "Dante, tell her. The black frame. Wouldn't she look much more like someone who would kill you with a pen?"

Dante shrugs at our reflection.

"That's between you two," he says, with an undercurrent of amusement only I can recognize. "Just figure it out quickly. We have to leave in ten minutes."

He takes a cigarette case from the inner pocket of his suit. He won't defend me. And he won't defend her either.

With a sound of pure frustration, she rips the gold glasses from her face and throws them on the dresser. She picks up the case with the frame I pointed out.

She puts them on. The difference is immediate. The sharp, minimalist design accentuates her features, transforming her from a "competent executive" into a "woman who could order your death and then calmly have dinner".

She glares at me.

"Satisfied?" she says, obviously pissed.

I smile. "Much better."

Dante, from the corner of the room, releases a cloud of smoke, his eyes still on us, appreciating his new family dynamic. Svetlana's expression, however, tells me that if there wasn't an important gala, she'd be testing the durability of my skull with one of her stilettos.

THIS WEEK, I FELT LIKE AN 18TH-CENTURY MONARCH. ALL BECAUSE OF THIS event, an older man with round glasses was sent to my tech bunker to teach me how to act, because Svetlana deemed my mannerisms *unsuitable* for high society. He listed some rules for me. Don't stare too much, but maintain eye contact. Don't interrupt, even if the person is stupid. Always hold the wine glass by the stem. No slang, no swearing, don't touch anyone first, don't speak openly about politics, religion, or money, and greet with firm handshakes. Etiquette is nothing more than violence disguised as courtesy. He said, "You can be passive-aggressive, but not with sarcasm. With *elegance*." He was a very sane man.

Svetlana spent the entire ride reviewing every single one of those rules. She said I couldn't embarrass them. She'd surely prefer *Dmitry* in my place, but he's somewhere in Eastern Europe, speaking Greek with some ambassador from the Orthodox elite.

Being abroad solving primarily social and moral problems is his natural habitat. I found out Dmitry speaks six languages fluently—Russian, English, French, Italian, German, and Greek. And he's almost there with Mandarin because, he said, with China's economic growth and its ties to the underworld of smuggling, cryptocurrencies, and technology, it's important. I had doubts about why *Greek*, but Dmitry considers it a moral obligation. According to him, any man who quotes Greek tragedies must, at the very least, read them in the original.

When we're just a few minutes away from the museum entrance, Svetlana summarizes, "So, Nyx, control your facial expression. And your hands. And your voice. And, if possible, your entire existence for a few hours." Dante wasn't saying anything, but her nervousness radiates to him too, because she says, "And you, Dante, at least try to look like you've read a book in your life."

Dante rolls his eyes. But he says nothing.

He's the only one of the three siblings without a framed university degree on the wall. It's not the first time Svetlana has placed herself in a position of intellectual superiority—she doesn't think he's refined, and she's sure I'm making him worse.

Svetlana and Dmitry's degrees intimidate me. MIT, Harvard, KLU, Stanford, ETHZ. Dante often gets pissed at how they form an *intellectual duo* that pulls rank, but he has his own specialty too. I see it, and I *hear* it. His knuckles are often busted, with gauze bandages between his fingers when there's barely time to heal. I've seen him wrap his hands with a thick black tape, winding it with all the patience he doesn't have for people. Luca mentioned that besides boxing, he knows a little bit of everything—he's trained Krav Maga for over ten years, has Muay Thai foundations straight from the source, and knows a martial art developed by the Red Army that I had no idea existed, called "sambo". It's a different kind of education. One that doesn't fit at Stanford or MIT, that teaches how to break bones and not how to quote Greek tragedies in the original. Svetlana despises it. I find it *fascinating*.

The armored SUV stops smoothly in front of the illuminated entrance of the Met. Luca opens the door for Dante, who gets out first. I expect Svetlana to exit, but Dante turns and extends his hand. To me.

I hesitate. It's a gesture for the public. A performance. I accept it. His hand is warm and firm around mine. He helps me out of the car, a perfect

gentleman. Svetlana gets out on the other side.

We enter. The noise of New York traffic is replaced by soft conversations, the clinking of crystal glasses, and a string quartet. It's a very different world from the one I'm used to. This one is clean, beautiful, and theatrical. Orderly. The gazes of most of those people are fixed on us. On *Dante*, mainly. It's clear he is feared and respected. And desired by more than half the women present.

Svetlana immediately separates from us, approached by an older man with a monocle. Tacky. Dmitry would be in his element here, floating between groups, speaking his six languages (with Greek). Dante, I expect, will find the nearest bar and stand there, looking menacing, until it's time to leave.

I'm wrong.

A short, bald man in a shiny suit, the museum's curator, approaches us with a wide smile. "Mr. Volkov! What a pleasure to have you as our patron this year. The Greek and Roman wing has never looked so magnificent, thanks to your generosity."

Dante nods. "Thank you for having us, Albert."

Albert then looks at me (for a little longer than necessary). He has such a cute smile that I genuinely think he doesn't know he's talking to two mobsters.

"And who is this young man with you?"

Dante places a possessive hand on the small of my back, guiding me a step forward. "This is Leonel Hays. He's the brains behind our digital security."

Albert becomes more interested. I follow my orders. I extend my hand and smile. "A pleasure, Mr. Albert."

The handshake is firm. Etiquette lessons.

"Digital security! How fascinating," says Albert, his smile widening. "It must be a constant challenge to keep the Volkovs'... *treasures* safe in today's world, mustn't it, Mr. Hays?"

I maintain eye contact. "The digital world is a battlefield, indeed."

"Ah, I hope you also enjoy art." Albert gestures to a nearby sculpture—a marble bust of a Roman emperor with a time-worn face. "Look, boys—thanks to donations from supporters like you, we were able to repatriate this Marcus Aurelius from a private collection of an oil baron in Monaco. A remarkable piece, don't you think?"

Dante approaches the statue. I follow him, a step behind. He examines it with a critical eye I didn't expect.

"A shame the original patina was compromised. This piece was looted from a villa near Herculaneum during the Second World War, wasn't it? It passed through two private collections before being 'recovered'."

Albert looks ridiculously happy. Apparently, Dante is the first person to know this in this room full of pseudo-intellectuals. *I'm looking at you, Svetlana.*

"Exactly, Mr. Volkov! Your erudition is remarkable," he exclaims, his cheeks flushed. *A very erudite man.*

I have no idea how Dante knows what he knows. After that, I just watch, a little out of my element, as Dante speaks with great authority about… *art.*

He talks about the Elgin Marbles. He knows an amphora is from the Transitional Period by the way the warrior holds the spear. I try to connect the dots. The image of the brute who trains Krav Maga and breaks bones doesn't align with the man who debates the provenance of Roman artifacts. It's fascinating. And *infuriating*. Every time I think I've understood him, that I've put him in a box—the brute, the Don, the monster, the lover—he kicks the side of the box out and shows me a new room I didn't know existed. He's a labyrinth. And I'm hopelessly lost in it.

Oh, Sveta. He's not the brute you think he is.

When Albert finally moves away, floating on his own cloud of curatorial bliss, a waiter glides towards us with a tray of champagne flutes. I take one. My hand automatically grips the thin stem, not the bowl. I'm hallucinating Svetlana's voice. *Remember the lesson, Leonel. Don't warm the drink.* Violence disguised as courtesy.

I lean towards Dante, who takes a glass for himself. He holds it by the stem with great familiarity. Of course.

"All this shit," I whisper, low enough for only him to hear. "The rules, the fake smiles. It's exhausting. It's all a lie."

I raise the glass to my lips, but Dante's hand stops my wrist midway.

I watch him. He watches the hall. He watches the waiter who served us, sees who else took a drink from the same tray. He brings his own glass to his nose, as if breathing the notes of whatever is in this glass. He looks at the liquid, searching for any sediment or discoloration. He waits for other

guests to drink from glasses from the same tray, waits to see if anyone will drop dead.

He meets my eyes and gives a minimal nod. *It's clean*.

He releases my wrist. His protection is as automatic as his violence.

"Of course it's a lie. It's a game." He looks me up and down. "And you're beautiful. Use it."

The heat that rises up my neck is humiliating.

He had never said anything about my appearance before. Never. He's called me a freak, a curse, a whore, a disgrace, and I must be forgetting something, but 'beautiful' is definitely not on that list. My apathy shatters.

"You think I'm beautiful, mister?"

I want to keep going, I want to provoke him back, ask, "*Beautiful enough for you to fuck me on this canapé table right here in front of everyone?*" But I don't. Etiquette.

Dante's gaze drops to my mouth, and for a second, the Don of the Volkovs mask slips. I see the hunger underneath. The same hunger I feel.

"You know you're beautiful. Don't feign surprise," he says, his voice hoarse. He leans in just enough for only me to hear. "I buttoned your fucking collar because there are too many people in this hall looking at something that isn't theirs. Now drink your champagne and behave."

He pulls away. He leaves me there, melted and completely fucked in the middle of the goddamn Metropolitan Museum of Art.

I look at the glass in my hand. Champagne suddenly seems like the strongest drink in the world.

Fuck it. I love him so much it hurts.

THE SUV STOPS IN FRONT OF THE MANSION. I DIDN'T GET ANY congratulations from Svetlana for not embarrassing anyone, but I also didn't get any lectures or threats, so I consider it progress. The ride is a list of her complaints about people: they're condescending, pretentious, mediocre, some are stupid. She also hates social events. Dante is content to listen to her complain, saying a few things in Russian. If I had to guess, I'd translate it as *calm down. I know. Yes, they're all ridiculous.*

The guard at the mansion door approaches and opens the door for Svetlana. She gets out, saying to Dante, "The Rotterdam shipment report will be on your desk at nine. I expect your comments before noon."

Dante gives her a dismissive wave. She glares at him. He doesn't get out of the car.

"Aren't you getting out?"

"I have business to attend to," he says naturally.

Svetlana grimaces. She knows there's no business other than me. "Ugh."

She still expresses disgust. Acceptance isn't endorsement. Unlike Dmitry, who once thanked me during a dinner, away from prying ears, for Dante being calmer these past few months, Svetlana still fantasizes about the right moment to murder me with her own hands.

She straightens up, smoothing her silk dress, and begins to parade towards the entrance. She gives a nod to Marco and Grigory, Dante's capos, who are smoking by the door.

Marco takes the cue and approaches. He stops at the open window as soon as the guard closes Svetlana's door.

"Boss, sorry to bother," he says. "Is the settlement with the Brighton Beach contacts still on for tomorrow?"

"It's on."

Marco's gaze then meets mine. His expression changes. Professional respect gives way to a cautious camaraderie. "Hey, kid. We're thinking of a poker game later, in the back room. To celebrate the fall of the Malakovs. Even Luca said he might play a hand. You should show up."

The inner circle of Volkov's guys now consists of a few muscular hulks and me. I don't leave my bunker much, but sometimes we see each other. I'm secretly teaching Marco everyone else's tells. He's preparing to spread the most absurd fake news he can invent to justify his sudden, crushing victories on poker nights. I promised to lose to him if he started his disinformation campaign in front of me. It's a very fair deal, if you ask me.

But before I can even think of a response, Dante says, "He's busy."

Marco gets it immediately. None of the capos talk back to Dante, let alone *question* him. They respect him, and above all, they are *terrified* of him at all times.

"Of course, boss. Good night."

Dante gestures to the driver, and the car starts to move, leaving the capos and the mansion behind.

Busy. I love it when he uses that excuse. My duties will probably involve being on my knees.

The rest of the ride to my—*our*—house is silent. When we arrive, the forest is dark, the concrete and glass fortress softly lit. He follows me into the suite. The door closes, and the world outside disappears.

I take off my jacket, tossing it onto a chair. I start unbuttoning my shirt.

"Tired?" Dante's voice comes from behind me.

"Social events are worse than interrogations," I reply, without turning around. "At least in interrogations, people are more honest."

I feel his presence approaching. His hands land on my waist, warm, heavy.

"You did well today," he says, his voice a low murmur near my ear. "You behaved."

I sigh. I turn to him, sliding my hands up his chest. "That's a shame," I whisper back. "The night would have been much more fun if I hadn't behaved."

"Then try not to behave now."

He leans in and kisses me, deep, slow, possessive. A kiss from someone who no longer has any doubts. A kiss from someone who is exactly where they want to be.

One hand slides up my back, his fingers tangling in my hair, pulling my head back, deepening the kiss. I melt against him, my entire being responding to a command that didn't need to be spoken.

When we pull apart, he keeps his forehead pressed against mine. His breath is hot on my skin. His eyes, dark and infinite, stare into me.

He's still fighting. I can feel it. The beast inside the cage, scratching at the bars, impatient.

But now, the cage has a keeper.

And the beast knows the way back to silence.

A path that goes through me.

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CHAD.

CHAD IS REINVENTING HIMSELF. At least, that's what his new career coach, discovered via an Instagram ad, told him to do. He adjusts his LinkedIn profile for the seventeenth time, sitting in his home office—a corner of the living room with a wobbly desk and a yellowed monitor.

"Digital Synergy Strategic Architect," he types, savoring the words. It sounds important. It sounds like someone who wasn't fired, but rather "transitioned to new exponential growth opportunities."

He sips his instant coffee. His mug has an old, faded tint, "#1 Boss," but it's an artifact from a lost civilization. He misses having employees to solve his life's technical problems. His new printer, for instance, sometimes disconnects from the Wi-Fi for no apparent reason. Probably a virus. Everything is always a virus.

An electronic hum and a mechanical click. He frowns. The printer in the corner, which had been dormant for days, wakes up. The small green lights blink.

"Huh?"

He pokes his laptop's touchpad. He hadn't sent anything to print.

With a whirring of gears, the machine's rollers begin to turn, pulling a single sheet of paper from the tray. Chad watches as the sheet slides through the internal mechanism. What is this? A random test page? A system error?

The sheet emerges, warm and pristine, landing softly in the output tray.

Silence.

Chad stands up, shuffling his feet on the carpet. He'd have to unplug it again. He leans over the machine, expecting just an ink smudge or an error code.

He peeks at the sheet.

In the exact center of the page, in a simple, tiny font, as if typed by a bored ghost, there's a message. Just three words.

Chad blinks. He picks up the paper, feeling the cheap texture between his fingers. He reads it again. The message has no sender, no context, no explanation. It's just there, in a sea of white.

He looks at the printer. The machine stares back, a green light blinking innocently. He looks around his empty apartment. The windows were closed.

"What the fuck...?" he whispers into the silence.

Who did this? A Russian hacker? Those marketing people he fired? Could it be... Leo?

He reconsiders. No. Leo's a good guy. Always helped him out.

He slaps the table—he knows who it was.

Nicole, it was definitely her, always with that look like she knew more than she was saying.

He mutters an expletive and leaves the sheet on the kitchen table. He keeps it there, displaying its tiny printed letters, and it, in all its glory, sits with its elegant writing:

fuck u chad

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